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From the creators of Ori
and the Will of the Wisps

NO REST for the WICKED

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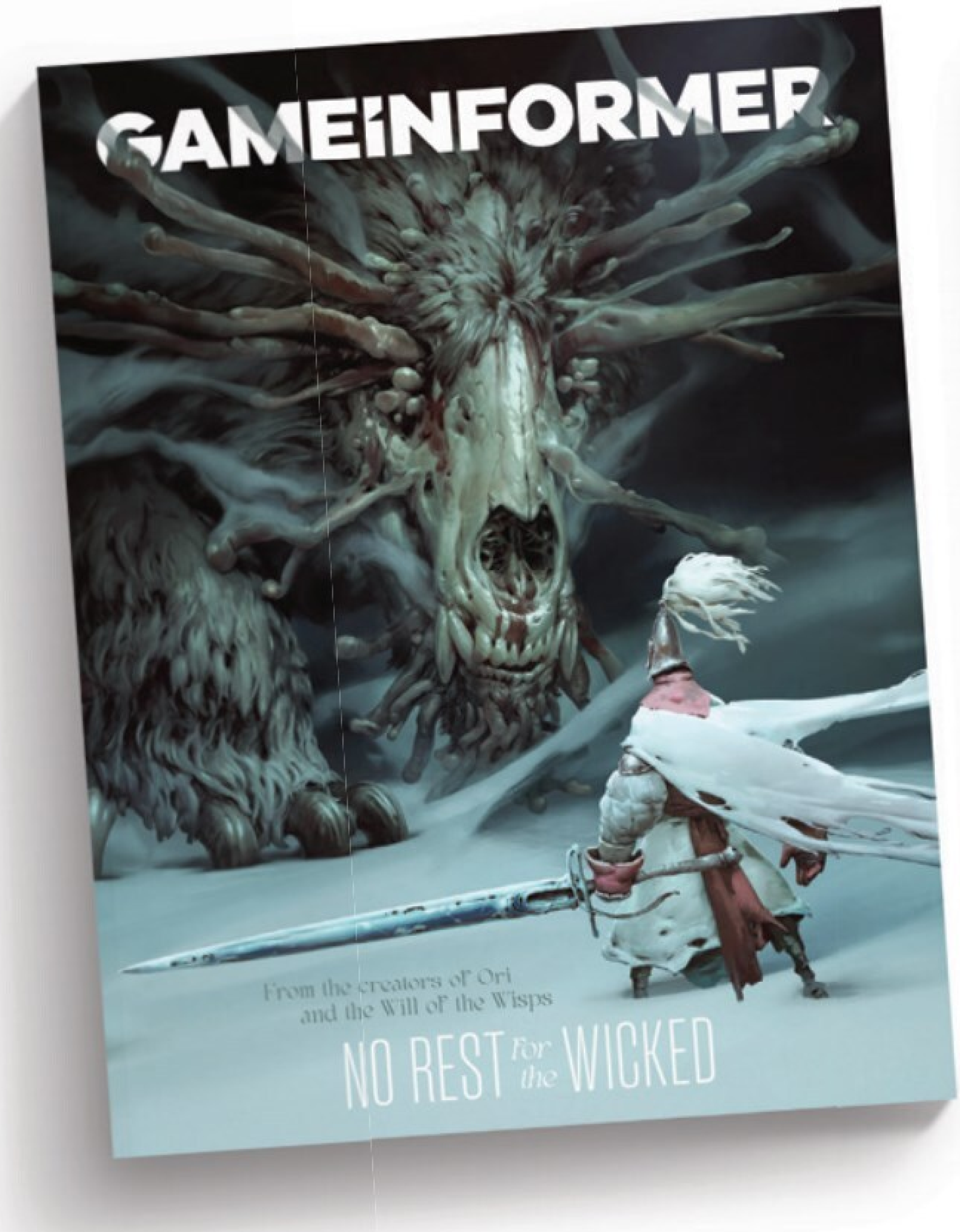
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NO REST for the WICKED

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EDITOR'S NOTE

A LONG WAY FROM WHERE WE STARTED

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

THE VIDEO GAMING HOBBY tends to focus on the new. The hottest release, the latest expansion, the next big console – it's fun to get excited about what's just around the corner and relish the excitement of the remarkable technology, artistry, and teamwork developers harness to push gaming forward.

But in that focus on the new, it's easy to lose sight of how far things have come over the years, which in turn robs all that newness of the appreciation it deserves.

Older gamers can recall the lengths to which we all went to have fun and the limits those early years placed on the games we could play. Tiny TVs and monitors often revealed dual-color visuals presented with 8-bit technology. Games were short, single-screen affairs and, with rare exceptions, featured little thought to balance, quality assurance, or playability. Cartridges and discs broke easily or sometimes didn't work at all. Eventually, some games offered save systems of sorts – often demanding you write down long strings of letters and numbers to input the next time you played.

There was an undeniable charm and simplicity to gaming in those days, but all but the most hardcore classicists should be willing to admit that it could also be a real pain.

Even many younger players can likely appreciate the mammoth strides gaming has made in just the last couple of decades. Not so long ago, regularly playing with friends over the internet was a pipe dream. And while we might bemoan the use of day-one patches to fix games that arrive unfinished or broken, the reality is many titles, even 15 years ago, would never be updated if a busted boss fight or game system wasn't working – that's just how it was.

There's an amusing sensation I suspect we can all identify with; at some point anywhere between the '90s and today, we've all looked at a game's graphics and remarked at how unbelievable it all looks – like it's "real life." Then, sure enough, some new game or technology eclipses that perception and leaves us wondering how we ever thought that old game was so mind-blowing.

That's the joy of following a medium that is at the forefront of storytelling, artistry, and technology; I'm constantly wowed by the innovations that chart the future of gaming, and the way that once remarkable feats – like four-player co-op or fully voiced characters or 4K graphics – pass from novelty to expected commonality.

But if we pause and consider it all, I think it makes those once-novelties all the more fun to enjoy in today's games, even as we continue to stare toward the horizon of what's next.

I hope you enjoy the issue!

GAMEINFORMER
NO REST for the WICKED

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

No Rest for the Wicked sees Ori and the Blind Forest/Will of the Wisps developer Moon Studios tackle its first action RPG. We traveled to Vienna, Austria, to play the game, and our cover art highlights its beautiful oil paint-inspired art direction.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Brian Shea

Online Content Director

People who have read, watched, or listened to my work (or follow me on social media) likely know about my love for Mario, Zelda, Sonic, and Marvel. However, before I ever held a controller or read a comic book, I was obsessed with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. That's why, when the opportunity arose to write a history of TMNT in video games for this issue, I jumped at the chance. The creation of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird impacted the early years of my life in such a profound way, and I'm ecstatic for you to read the resulting article on p. 22.

Blake Hester

Senior Associate Editor

Lately, there's been a lot of catastrophizing over Best Buy removing DVDs and Blu-rays from stores and what that means for physical media going forward. I understand the concern. When a store decides to stop selling physical goods, we're at risk of losing access to loads of films. However, this misses a big counterpoint: we're in a physical media renaissance, led in large part by independent companies acquiring, remastering, and printing some of the best – if somewhat underseen – films from around the world. Take a look around; I promise you'll find plenty to be hopeful about.

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spotlight

36 COVER STORY – NO REST FOR THE WICKED

The creators of the Ori games are moving onto a new genre with No Rest for the Wicked, but the team's excellent design sensibilities and beautiful art direction remain intact for this action RPG. We traveled to Vienna, Austria, to play the game and learn how Moon Studios' geographically disparate team is creating its new, dark world.

10 THE RISE OF PALWORLD

Palworld did not come out of nowhere – we've been expecting the release of "Pokémon with guns" for some time – but its incredibly overwhelming success is something not even its creators saw coming.

22 TURTLE POWER!

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise owes at least some of its impressive and confusingly enduring success to its video game entries. We spoke with TMNT co-creator Kevin Eastman and others about the legacy of the Turtles in video games and looked ahead to what's next.

48 ANGEL FROM HEAVEN

We spoke with Korean developer Shift Up Second EVE Studio about its upcoming impressive sci-fi action title, Stellar Blade. We learned why making a game with an ending was a driving force for the team and how influential Nier: Automata has been on its development.

80 CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Three Resident Evil games have been ported to VR platforms. We spoke to members of Capcom about how it did it (most recently with Resident Evil 4 remake for PSVR2) and, perhaps more importantly, why it did it.

regulars

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52 PREVIEWS // **70** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING

CANDY CON

CREATE. PLAY. REPEAT.

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Replies

UNDER THE RADAR

Hello G.I.! First off, I love the content you all produce, whether in the form of writing or multimedia. Having an outlet dedicated to nuanced and thoughtful games journalism is a breath of fresh air in an industry landscape of social-media pumping and disingenuous takes. My Question: What game are you most looking forward to in 2024 that you feel may be off or flying under the radar? Personally, I really hope Botany Manor comes out this year, as it looks relaxing and charming.
– Joe via email

↳ *While so many triple-A games have dominated the most-anticipated lists, 2024 is shaping up to be a great year for indies as well. As you mentioned, Botany Manor looks really awesome, but there are a ton of titles that are coming out over the next few months (and even later in the year) that have caught our eyes.*

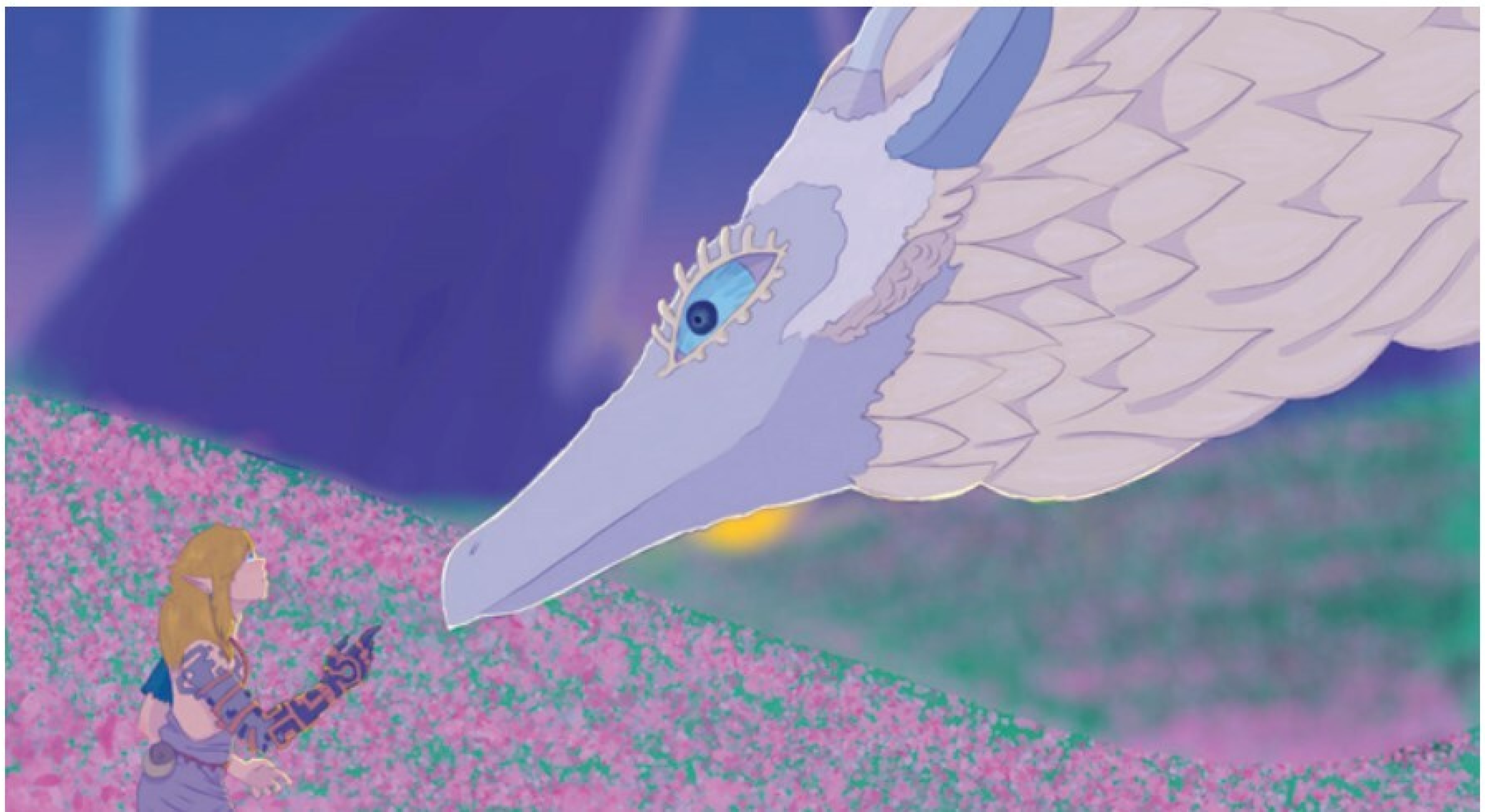
Indies like Hauntii, Time Flies, Beastieball, and Animal Well impressed us over the last two years at Summer Game Fest, and we're still waiting for them to come out. We also have high hopes for Blazing Strike, a 2D fighting game inspired by Street Fighter III, though we've been waiting for that title for several years now. We do our best to keep our eyes on the horizon and bring attention to the most exciting under-the-radar releases, but in this era, there are so many games launching and getting announced on a near-daily basis that it's inevitable that the next big sleeper hit will sneak up on many of us. Still, you have our word that if a game looks exciting – regardless of the profile of its developer or publisher – you'll read about it in the pages of Game Informer *or on GameInformer.com!*

NOSTALGIA NEEDED

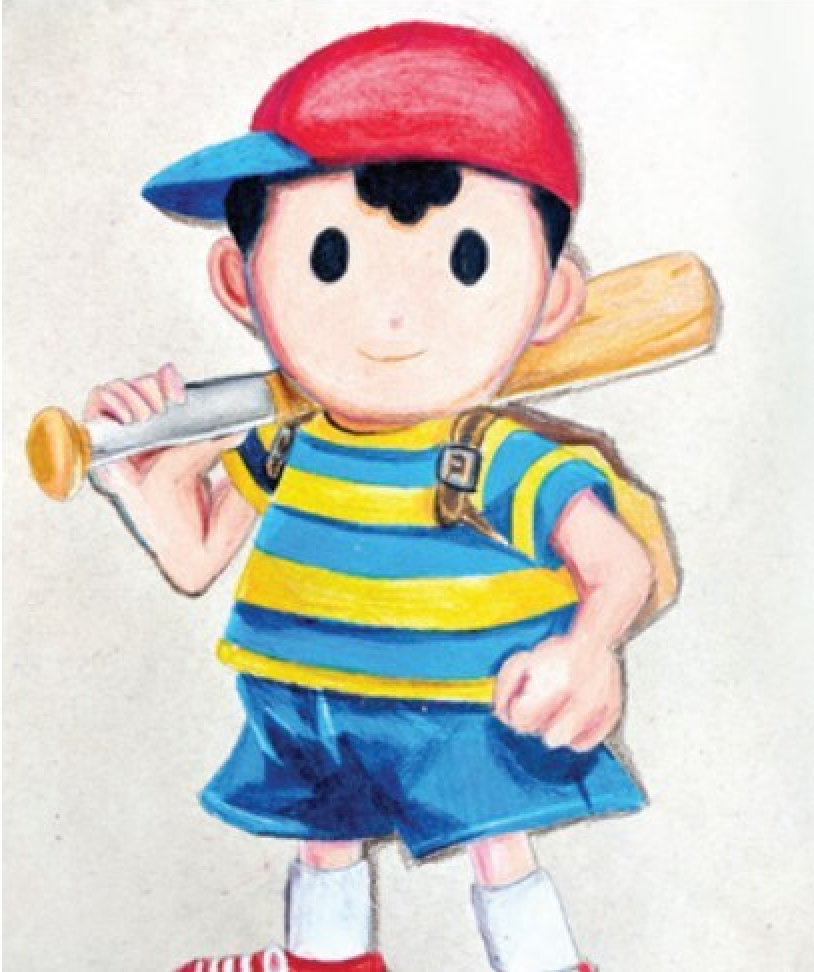
I think the video game industry has shifted a bit in part due to nostalgia. A lot of remakes, remasters, and spinoffs of older games have been huge over the past few years. We are in a time where people are reminded of what once was and the industry is drawing them back in. I feel that a huge wave of mid-30s aged folks is driving this change. Unfortunately, with that comes several developers capitalizing on these folks who now have money to drive in-game purchases. I think one thing that would make the magazine better is some of that nostalgia. Have a small section with a reprint from the past to show how things have changed and help light that video game spirit in someone that it may have slowly faded in. **– Birgin via email**

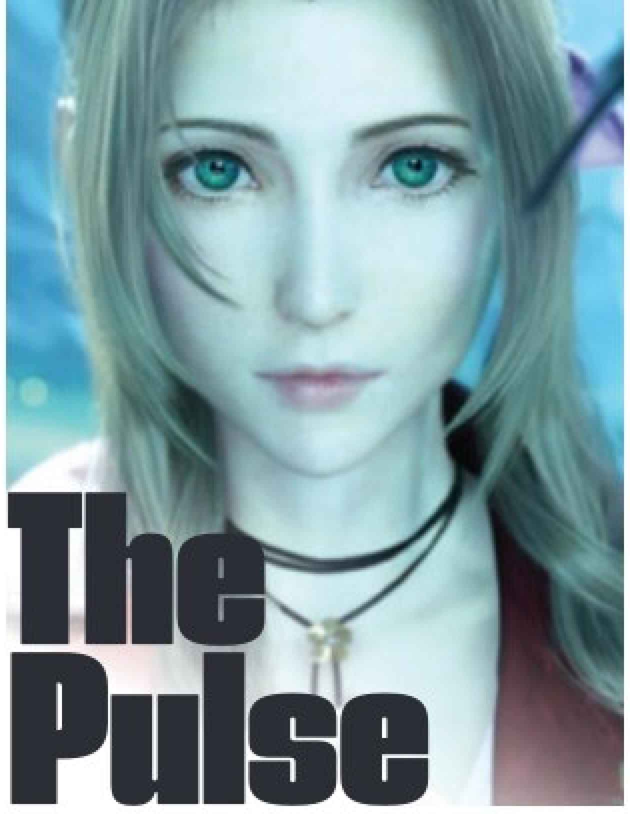
↳ *We love nostalgic video games at* Game Informer. *Our long-running* Replay *video series has been highlighting the best (and worst) of retro games for nearly a decade and a half, while our podcasts –* The Game Informer Show *and* All Things Nintendo *– regularly celebrate classic titles. Whenever we can, we let our enthusiasm for these classic games spill onto the pages of this magazine, which is why we were so excited to highlight the history of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles video game franchise through an in-depth feature (p. 22). You're not alone in wanting more retro and nostalgic content from us, so while we'll likely stop short of reprinting old articles, you can bet we'll continue highlighting the classics of the industry whenever the opportunity arises.*

Reader art submission: Kaleigh Jones, age 19



Reader art submission: Isabella Sachse





The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Final Fantasy VII Rebirth **NEW RELEASE**
2. Helldivers 2 **NEW RELEASE**
3. Persona 3 Reload **NEW RELEASE**
4. Final Fantasy VII Remake ▲
5. Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth **NEW RELEASE**
6. Baldur's Gate 3 ▼
7. Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League **NEW RELEASE**
8. Tomb Raider I-III Remastered **NEW RELEASE**
9. Palworld **NEW RELEASE**
10. Starfield ▲

Soundoff: Platform Exclusive Games

We asked our readers and community if platform exclusives are important to them. Here are some of their responses!

It's bad for consumers, but it does matter. The whole reason why I have a PlayStation is because of their exclusives, I don't mind it because they're high quality and amazing games. **– via Instagram**

I wish there were less exclusives overall. I do love when a studio can tailor a game to the platform's unique features, like Astro's Playroom, or how games like Gears 5 and Ryse still look amazing because they're hyper optimized for one system. **– via Instagram**

No, because it's bad for me as a consumer and in a perfect world, every title would simply be multiplat, however, I do understand why they do it from a business (and even a technical) perspective. **– via Instagram**

Yes, because it pushes the competitors to make better games. If all or most of Xbox's games come to PlayStation, then Sony won't feel the pressure to have a reason to buy the PS5 (the reason being exclusives), so therefore they will stop producing quality products. **– via Instagram**

Not a fan. Many people can't afford $1,000-plus for three consoles, plus exclusivity has been the driving force behind the consolidation of the gaming industry, which is also bad for business. **– via Instagram**

There was a time where it mattered greatly. As the hardware differences between consoles diminish, however, I find it less and less important. The differences between a game on PS5 and Xbox Series X are so slight that there is no reason I should need both consoles to experience specific games. **– via Instagram**

↓

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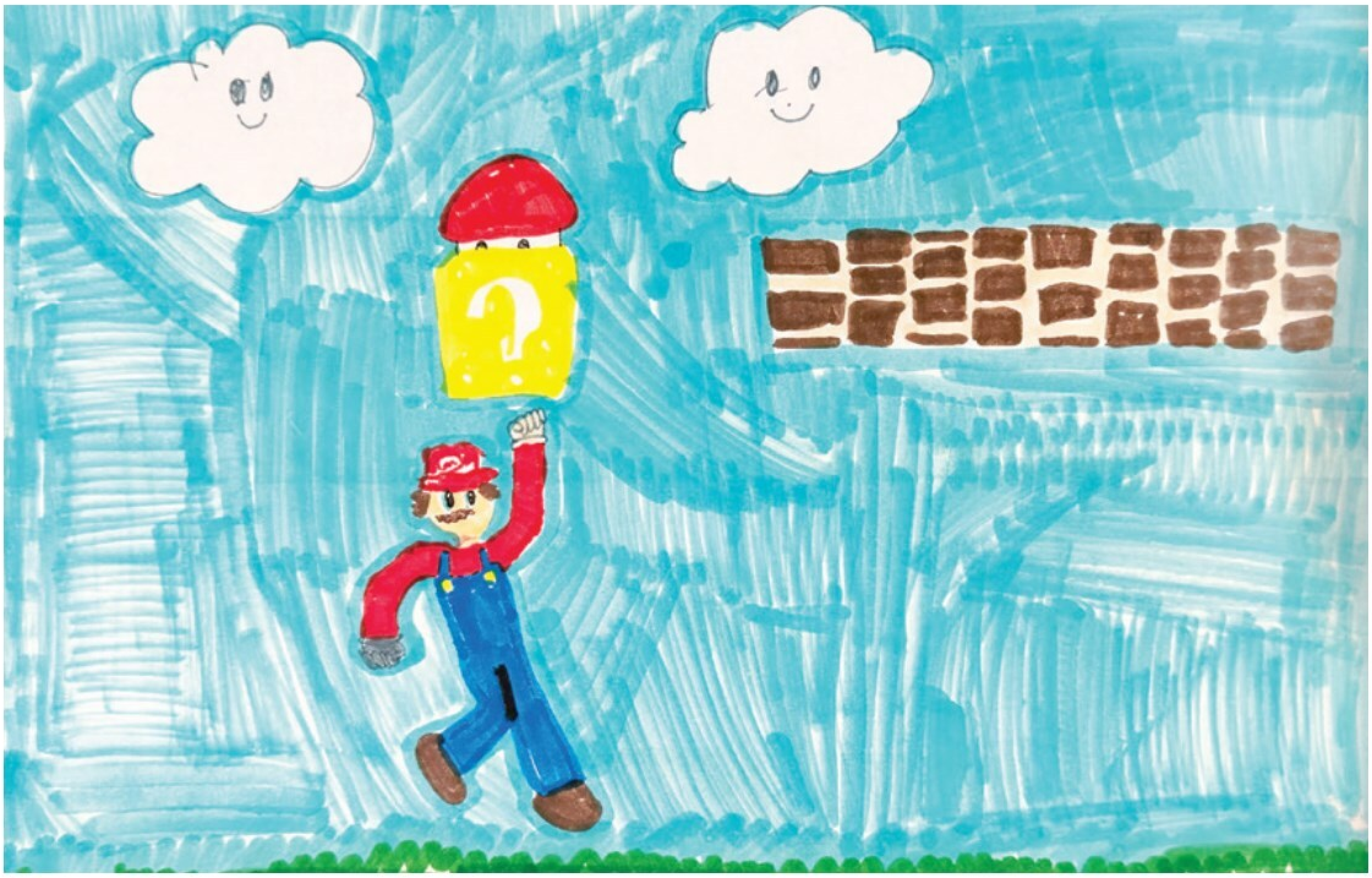

Reader art submission: Kinsley Blanton

↙

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A SECOND CRACK AT IT

As an older gamer, I love the recent remake trend because it lets me play games I haven't played in a long time and usually with welcome improvements. Also, they allow younger generations to play games that were foundational in gaming history, and that's good for gaming culture. One sub-genre of remake I would love to see remade are games that flopped, especially sequels. I'm sure most of us can think of a game or two that could benefit from a second chance. Would love to see some of those games reimagined. **– Jason via email**

↳ *The current remake trend has given us modern re-imaginings of some of the most beloved titles, as well as several cult-classic games, in recent years. Who hasn't relished being able to revisit classic titles like Resident Evil 4 and Final Fantasy VII in modern formats? But you raise an interesting idea: What about remakes of outright bad games that had interesting ideas with poor execution?*

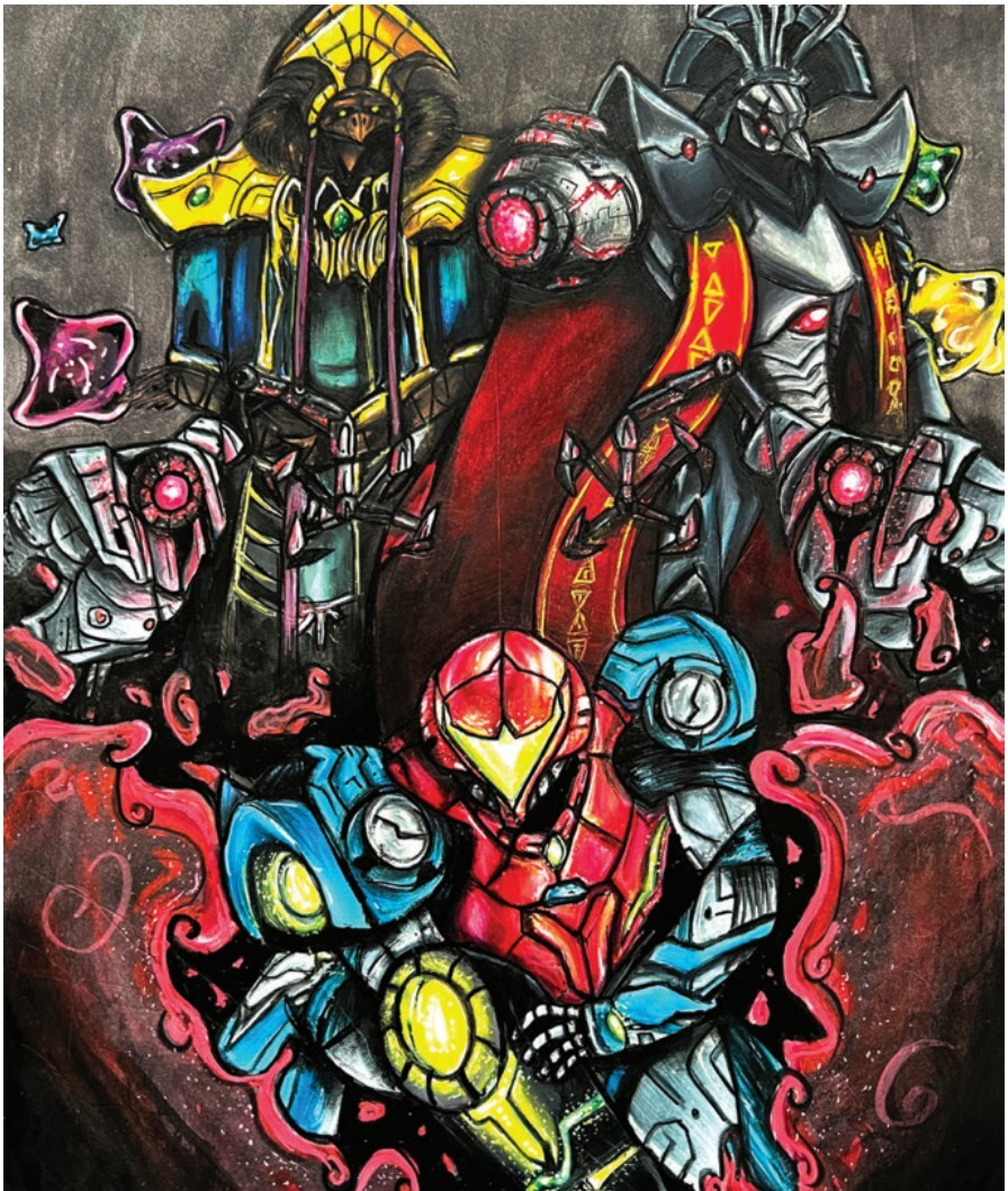
The big problem is that for games like RE4 or FFVII, there are built-in audiences since they are among the most beloved games of all time, whereas a bad game receiving a full-on remake would have an uphill climb; even if it somehow got greenlit, how likely is it that it would find an audience? Remakes are so prevalent right now because fans are clamoring for their favorite games to get remade and publishers see them as safer bets than new IP projects, so the prospect of getting a remake of a universally panned game might be harder than it sounds.

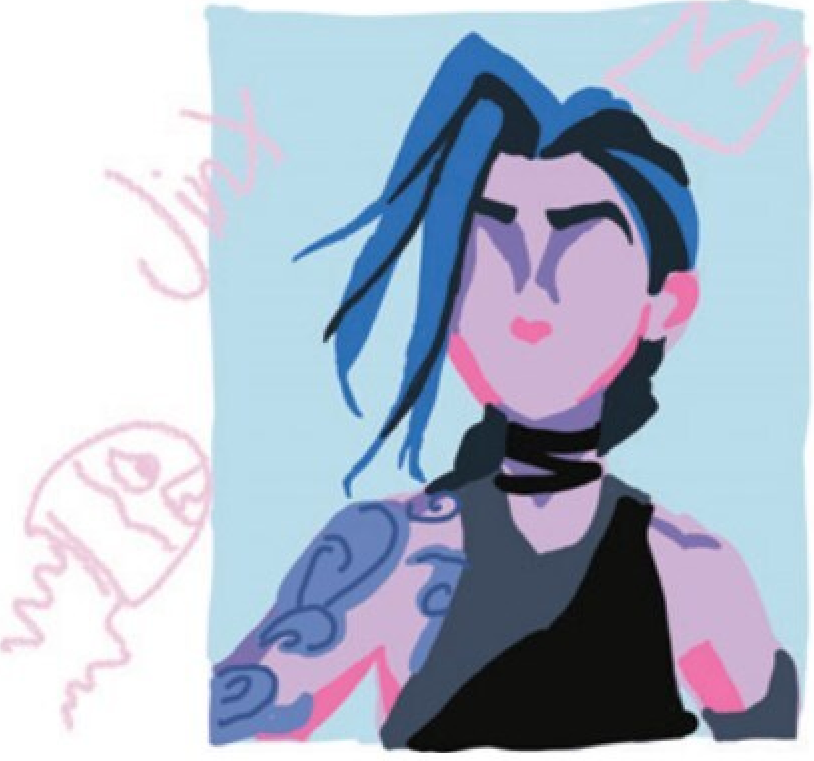
GETTING THE PICTURE

How long does it typically take you to finish writing a review? **– CAWallCrawler via email**

↳ *This is one of the most common questions we receive, and the reason we don't typically answer it is because the answer varies so much from game to game. For example, for large RPGs like Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth, and Persona 3 Reload (read all those reviews starting on p. 70), each of our reviewers put in between 80 and 100 hours. However, for smaller titles, it takes a fraction of that to get a complete sense of the game.*

Reader art winner: Jade Pyper, age 15





Reader art submission: Ariane Elmquist, age 9

Reader art submission: Christopher Massie

Reader art submission: Jada Caporicci, age 16

Reader art submission: Ian MacKay

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

1.

For this issue's cover story of No Rest for the Wicked, we flew to Vienna, Austria to visit Moon Studios' Thomas Mahler and Gennadiy Korol

PRINCESS
PEACH
SHOWTIME!

2.

Alex had the honor of spending time with royalty during a recent trip to New York. Read his full preview of Princess Peach: Showtime! on p. 62

UMA
YESPORTS | CHRIS WONG
CAPCOM CUP X
CHARACTER
JURI
CHARACTER
LUKE
HK
YESPORTS | CHRIS WONG

3.

We had the opportunity to attend Capcom Cup X and witness the tournament's first-ever $1 million grand prize performance

4.

We still owe Tom Nook some bells after this encounter with him and Isabelle last fall ■

THE RISE OF PALWORLD

Tracking the meteoric launch of the indie 'Pokémon with guns' survival hit

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Palworld's reveal made a massive splash in 2021 on a simple premise: Pokémon with guns. Of course, developer Pocketpair's vibrant open-world game wasn't outright promising to be that. The reveal trailer just happened to feature various creatures that looked a lot like Game Freak's own pocket monsters, and they happened to be carrying pistols, machine guns, and more. At its core, Palworld is a survival game, a genre that continues to grow even more popular as a perfect fit for the internet and streaming culture. But Pocketpair must have known that simply releasing a new survival game wasn't enough – it needed something different, and through clever, albeit questionable, design and some luck, the team landed on giving familiarly adorable creatures an AK-47.

After various trailers since that initial reveal three years ago, including gameplay showcases and even an appearance at Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest last year, Pocketpair finally released Palworld into Early Access on PC via Steam and Xbox in January. Immediately, Palworld took over the gaming sphere, crossing 1 million copies sold in just eight hours.

In the game's first three days on the market, more than 5 million people purchased Palworld, reaching an all-time peak of 1.5 million players on just Steam. These numbers alone are enough to solidify an indie game like Palworld as a massive hit, but these numbers would become child's play in the following weeks.

It is safe to say Palworld blew past all expectations, and if you were on the internet in January, there's a good chance you read about its debut, controversy, and more. But if you're unfamiliar, fear not – we've got you covered.

WHAT IS PALWORLD?

Palworld is, at its simplest, a survival game from Pocketpair, an independent studio behind other games like Craftopia and AI: Art Impostor. Ironically, Pocketpair is based in Tokyo, Japan, just a 10-minute drive from The Pokémon Company, as *VideoGameChronicle's* Jordan Middler first noted on X (formerly Twitter).

If you go into Palworld expecting "Pokémon With Guns," you will likely be disappointed. While there are Pokémon-like creatures called Pals that look and behave similarly to Pokémon, you aren't a fated trainer traversing the world to collect gym badges and take on an Elite Four. You are someone attempting to survive in an environment of various biomes with the help of Pals, melee weapons, and, of course, guns.

You catch Pals similarly to how you might in a Pokémon game, utilizing special balls called Pal Spheres to add them to your party and Paldeck list. From there, you can train your Pals to make them stronger, build homes, and, with time, develop a factory home base where you can become a capitalist leader who does little work and relies on your Pals to do it for you. Ultimately, your goal is to gather resources so you can capture Pals, then gather more resources more efficiently so that you can catch even more Pals in even more dangerous regions of the world – it's the typical survival game loop millions of players love.

You can play with up to 31 other players on a single server on PC, but Palworld only supports up to four players on an Xbox server. Despite the gap between the PC and Xbox versions, the game is notably unavailable to play on PlayStation or Switch, making this a substantial console-exclusive win for Microsoft. Like others in the genre, you can fight raid-like bosses with friends, build a base with them, and encounter various NPCs in the world. In these ways and more, Palworld is more like Valheim than it is Pokémon, but it's clear the "Pokémon With Guns" pitch is what initially drew players in.

King of the Forest
Lv 50 Mammorest

PALWORLD'S METEORIC LAUNCH

Palworld hit Early Access on January 18, quickly rising to third place on Steam in Top Wishlists, which often provides insight into how a game might sell. In just eight hours, Palworld crossed 1 million copies sold, and players felt this popularity on day one. The servers were quickly over-encumbered, leading to issues for people trying to play.

"We are blown away with the response to Palworld and we're doing our best to respond to your issues," the Palworld X account tweeted on January 19. "Currently, our server provider is reporting that due to the large amount of concurrent players, the servers have become unstable and you may be experiencing issues connecting to servers." *Game Informer* reached out to Pocketpair to discuss the game post-launch, but did not hear back in time. *Game Informer* also reached out to PR for Palworld and was told even it struggled to get in touch with the studio.

In just 24 hours, Palworld crossed 2 million copies sold on January 20, surpassing 730,000 concurrent players on Steam the same day. That's the 10th-highest all-time peak for all games on Steam. As server issues persisted, Pocketpair announced on January 20 it had an emergency meeting with Epic Games and its Epic Online Services team to resolve connectivity issues. While problems still occurred after this, conditions were notably better and, today, stable. Forty hours after the game's launch, Palworld crossed 3 million copies sold. Mind you, these stats from Pocketpair only accounted for the game's Steam sales, presumably meaning millions more were happening over on Xbox Series X/S.

The hype continued as X (formerly Twitter) timelines and YouTube feeds grew even more cluttered with Palworld content, crossing 4 million copies in just three days. Pocketpair incorrectly announced on January 21 that Palworld achieved the highest concurrent player count of any paid game in Steam history, but internet sleuths were quick to point out that PUBG set this record in 2018 with 3.2 million players, a record it still holds today. The confusion came from PUBG being a paid game at launch in 2018 but going free-to-play in 2022, something Pocketpair says it was unaware of at the time of its post, which is why it thought it achieved the record with Palworld.

After its first weekend on the market, Pocketpair announced on Monday, January 22, that Palworld crossed more than 5 million copies sold in three days. To put into perspective how massive of an achievement that is, it took PlayStation 5-exclusive (and first-party developed) Marvel's Spider-Man 2, 11 days to hit the 5 million mark. At the time, Palworld had already claimed third place on Steam's all-time peak history of paid games, behind PUBG's 3.2 million and Counter-Strike 2's 1.8 million concurrent player peak.

The following day, Palworld crossed 6 million copies sold, overtaking Counter-Strike 2's peak later that day. One day later, it crossed 7 million copies sold, and then 8 million copies the day after.

Pocketpair's biggest update arrived on February 22 when it revealed that more than 25 million people had played Palworld in roughly one month: 15 million players on Steam and 10 million on Xbox. That comes after a January 31 update where Microsoft revealed Palworld had the biggest third-party Xbox Game Pass launch ever. Here's another reference point to put this game's success into perspective: PlayStation announced on February 13 that Marvel's Spider-Man 2 crossed 10 million units sold, taking just under four months to do so.

If one thing is clear, Palworld is not just a hit but possibly *the* hit of 2024, and we're just a few months in. It's important to note that Palworld is still an Early Access game, which means Pocketpair still has work left to do, and issues will likely continue to be more abundant than in a standard release. A recent Early Access roadmap reveals the team aims to add PvP, additional raid bosses, cross-play support, and more over time.

As of February 26, Palworld's concurrent player count is 118,025, with a 24-hour peak of 283,406. That's a sharp drop-off from its 2.1 million peak near the end of January. But, as the Pocketpair community manager, who goes by Bucky on X (formerly Twitter), notes, that's okay.

"In May of 2023, I was convinced that Palworld could break the 50,000 player mark," Bucky writes on X on February 14. "Anything above that seemed unobtainable though, and I certainly never expected it to reach into the millions. It has taken years to get to this point, and Palworld only really begins from here. Everyone is working hard to fix the issues and prepare new content and Pals. Some of you have had your fun over the last 3 weeks and found yourself putting the game down. That is fine."

Bucky continues, adding, "You don't need to feel bad about that. Palworld, like many games before it, isn't in a position to pump out massive amounts of new content on a weekly basis. New content will come, and it's going to be awesome, but these things take a little bit of time. There are so many amazing games out there to play; you don't need to feel guilty about hopping from game to game."

It's a valid point, and player retention is something even the biggest companies in gaming, like Epic Games (with Fortnite) and Bungie (with Destiny 2), struggle with. Palworld's success so far likely affords Pocketpair all the time it needs for another heaping dose of content for Palworld, and a massive player base awaits the game's next big update. ■

CONTROVERSY IN PALWORLD

Shortly after the game's massive launch, more and more players and online spectators began to throw some hefty accusations at Pocketpair. While the Pokémon comparison is clear, some have called into question both how Pals were created, claiming the use of A.I., and how similar some are to Game Freak's own Pokémon designs. Dozens of comparison threads, apparent behind-the-scenes looks at similarities to the models (many of which were disproven as fake or blatant lies in the following days), and more popped up to determine how Pals are created and whether Nintendo should go after Pocketpair. It didn't help that Pocketpair's 2020 survival game, Craftopia, went through a similar controversy for its striking similarities to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, nor does it help that its 2022 game, AI: Art Impostor, outright uses A.I. to generate images for use in the 3 to 8 player party game. Many online began to craft a narrative that Palworld was using A.I. to create its Pals, infringing on copyrights held by The Pokémon Company. Of course, as the dust settled, and despite Pocketpair's silence on the controversy, except to say it doesn't condone the death threats its developers received as a result, many realized these claims were baseless and void of factual evidence.

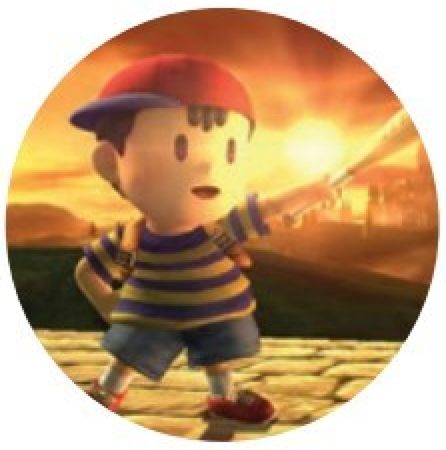
Neither Nintendo, Game Freak, nor The Pokémon Company have taken legal action against Palworld, instead releasing a vague statement that it was investigating potential infringement on intellectual property rights related to Pokémon in late January. Notably, at the time of writing, nothing has come of this since.

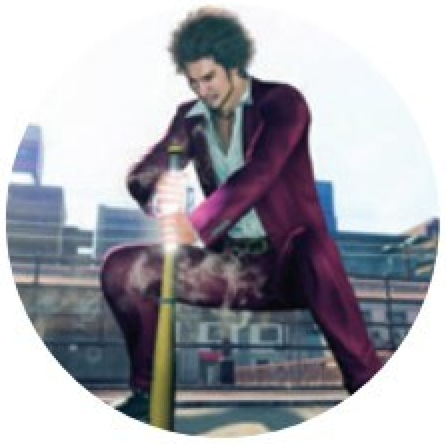
TOP FIVE

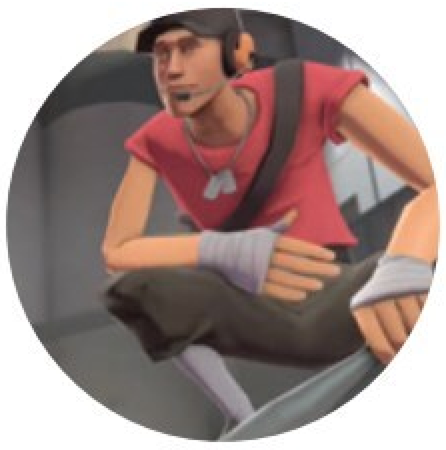
BASEBALL BAT BATTLE BOYS

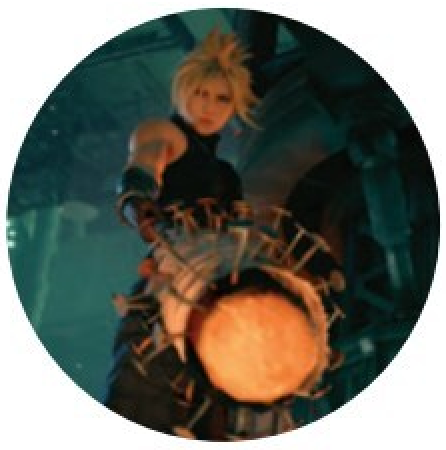
Sometimes the best weapon is the one you pick up at a sporting goods store

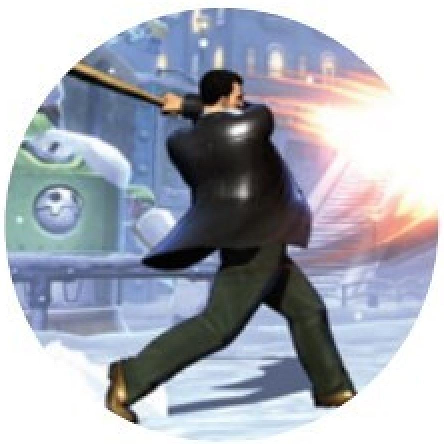
BY KYLE HILLIARD











1 **Ness** is a typical American kid living in the 20th century, as interpreted by Japanese writer/director Shigesato Itoi in EarthBound. And as a result, Ness loves the great American pastime of baseball and always has a baseball bat with him to fight aliens, monsters, and other popular video game characters.

2 Up until **Ichiban Kasuga**'s appearance in the Like a Dragon franchise, the protagonist fought primarily with their fists. Ichiban was the first to recognize wrapping a baseball bat in barbed wire is a much more effective weapon.

3 Team Fortress 2's **Scout** is among the few classes in the game that prefer a blunt melee weapon to a blade. He's also the only one that wears a baseball cap, so it would be weird if he used a different weapon.

4 **Cloud** would undoubtedly be higher on this list if he weren't primarily known for using one of video games' most iconic swords, but we'd be lying if we said we didn't enjoy fighting Sephiroth in Final Fantasy VII Remake while wielding a baseball bat stuffed full of nails.

5 When it comes to fighting zombies, none are more creative than Dead Rising's **Frank West**, but sometimes the simplest answer is the correct answer. This is why even when he cameos in other games, Frank is always seen carrying his most reliable weapon: a baseball bat. ■

INTERVIEW

All Rhodes Lead to Hyrule

WWE 2K24 cover star Cody Rhodes shares his Zelda thoughts and most anticipated game of 2024

INTERVIEW BY MARCUS STEWART

In January, I traveled to Tampa/St. Peterburg, FL, for WWE's Royal Rumble and to check out WWE 2K24 at a special preview event. While I was there, I had the chance to chat with one of 2K24's cover stars and the winner of the 2024 Men's Royal Rumble match, Cody Rhodes.

The "American Nightmare" is a lifelong gamer and professed Zelda fanatic (fun fact: during his early WWE run in '07 and '08, his wrestling boots sported the Triforce logo). So, I decided to forgo any wrestling questions and spent the few precious minutes I had with Cody getting his take on Tears of the Kingdom, how Majora's Mask stacks up compared to his favorite Zelda game, Ocarina of Time, and asked what game he's most looking forward to playing in 2024.

I know you're a big Zelda fan, so I've gotta ask: Did you play Tears of the Kingdom, and if so, what do you think?
Yeah, I went right through it. So, I feel like Breath of the Wild and Tears of Kingdom are one game because they're so huge. Like, you don't ever need to play another Zelda ever again if you're playing Tears of the Kingdom. I mean, just with the Depths, hunting all the damn Lynels down, and the Lynels just get harder as I get older, which makes me feel like I'm out of touch with gaming itself. But I really liked the story. We wanted more story with Breath of the Wild, we got some of that story with Ganondorf. But they did the right thing in terms of [realizing], "They still want more. Still want more." And I just think we're in a kind of golden age of the games that I grew up loving. Metal Gear Solid and Zelda, you're seeing remakes, you're seeing remasters, potentially an animated or a live-action movie. To me, I can't ask for a better thing because we gave all this energy as fans to it, and it can still continue on, you know?

Yeah, for sure. I'm playing Majora's Mask for the first time for a video feature for the website. Is that a favorite of yours? I know you're a big Ocarina of Time fan, but where do you land a Majora's Mask?
So Majora's Mask is a masterpiece. I get mad at it because people try to say it's better than Ocarina of Time. I feel like they're also one game, but Majora's Mask, for what it did with the cycle, the three-day cycle, and things changing with the night and day, there's still some games in this era who aren't getting that right. Like, it had a Red Dead-level nuance to it for a Nintendo 64 game. Love Majora's Mask.

I don't know how much time you have to play games now, but do you have a game that you're looking forward to coming out this year or anything that you haven't gotten to in your backlog?
I'll jump forward and say 2K24 for sure because I've only gotten a little bit of a taste of it and have been amazed. But the big one for me is [Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater]. And then, hopefully, I wonder if we'll get a Metal Gear Collection Volume 2 because I know a lot of people want to see Metal Gear Solid 4 playable on modern consoles. So, here's hoping. ■

WWE 2K24 launches on March 8 for PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, and PC

THE VIDEO GAME BIBLE

In the game industry, almost all roads lead to Dungeons & Dragons

BY SHANNON LIAO

When a group of former League of Legends employees left Riot Games to work on a massively multiplayer online fantasy game, industry veteran Michael Chow knew he wanted a dungeon master to lead their narrative team. Chow, who described the upcoming project as "Breath of the Wild with friends," picked Shankar Gupta-Harrison specifically for the hours he put into Dungeons & Dragons.

"I brought him in to be the narrative lead for the MMO because Shankar has put in something like 10 to 12,000 hours of time DMing [Dungeon-Mastering] tabletop games like Dungeons & Dragons," Chow tells *Game Informer*.

Gupta-Harrison was a former Riot senior publishing advisor before joining Believer. He also ran a D&D campaign that other industry heavyweights, including John Gonzalez, a writer who worked on Fallout: New Vegas and Shadow of Mordor, would attend and play.

"The way in which tabletop role-playing games can inform video game design is that it's one of the few game spaces that does multi-protagonist storytelling," Gupta-Harrison said. "As a Game Master, when you're creating a story, you're expected to accommodate multiple, very nuanced and highly realized characters in story, gameplay, and often in the open world space."

Gupta-Harrison's impressive time investment into Dungeons & Dragons turns out to be a rather common pastime that video game developers share, and the more conversations I had with game makers over months, the more I found this to be a throughline. In fact, you can think of D&D as the backbone and foundation which a lot of video games, especially narrative, open world, role-playing games, are built upon. While reporting this story, it was actually tough to find anyone who hadn't been shaped by their D&D experiences in some way.

"The thing about Dungeons & Dragons is that it's so focused on storytelling and creating the story with your friends. It's a way a lot of people learn to tell stories," CEO and president of Wizards of the Coast Cynthia Williams says. "But I would argue that goes all the way back to when we're all children and role-playing, like whether you were out in the woods on an adventure with your friends, or you were in your room playing with your stuffed animals and your toys. We were all making up stories and role-playing with it."

One of last year's best games, Baldur's Gate 3, has an even more apparent Dungeons & Dragons influence. Baldur's Gate 3 adapts the tabletop game's rules, and the principal narrative designer, Lawrence Schick, actually wrote and designed a campaign module for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons back in 1979. He's been playing D&D since the 1970s, and its influence is apparent in the games he's contributed to, including The Elder Scrolls Online.

In his view, D&D continues to be relevant today.

"Culturally, D&D, through its repeated versions, has continually been preparing the way for itself," Schick says. "It invented so many of the things that have become common in not just video games but other things. Like everybody knows what leveling up means, right? Even if you never have played D&D, even if you don't know what D&D is, you know what leveling up means, right? And so it's become part of the culture and helped the culture prepare for itself."

Many designers spoke of how Dungeons & Dragons offers player choice and agency, and so do the video games they make. One of the appealing features of Dungeons & Dragons is its ability to value player choice and agency. D&D is improvisation; it's the world around you reacting as you decide your next move. A dungeon master needs to be flexible and creative, and so does a narrative designer.

Baldur's Gate 3
↖

"One big takeaway I can say I've taken from my experience as a dungeon master is that as a player myself, I have a strong preference for being able to affect the world versus just experiencing it," says Andrea Sepenzis, Treehouse Games co-founder who helped launch *Arcane*, League of Legends' Netflix show and in-game event. Sepenzis is taking that knowledge with her into her next project, Codename: Islands, a multiplayer survival crafting game with an emphasis on teamwork.

"You are discovering new islands all the time," Sepenzis said. "New things are happening, new storms are happening, new fish are happening, new robots are happening, and as a player, as you gain agency in the world, you're going to be able to affect what you experience and what the actual world looks like. You will change the map."

XANADU

The games inspired by D&D go on to inspire even more games. It's an auspicious cycle that's made D&D almost omnipresent in game development. And you can see this pattern emerge in all corners of the industry.

Toward the end of the 2013 point-and-click adventure Kentucky Route Zero, an unnamed tabletop role-playing game and accompanying twenty-sided dice appear.

In an email, Kentucky Route Zero game developer Jake Elliott highlights a 1976 text adventure called "Colossal Cave Adventure" by developer Will Crowther, who composed his game based on D&D and spelunking in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky.

"When making Kentucky Route Zero, we were interested in re-exploring Mammoth Cave as a historically significant video game space, and so most of the game is set there, including many references back to 'Colossal Cave,' particularly the 'Xanadu' sequence in Act 3, which remixes some of the text from the older game," Elliott says.

Elliott adds that it's been a few years since he last played D&D, but his longtime friend and colleague Tamas Kemenczy, who worked with him on Kentucky Route Zero, is still in an active group.

"The thing with D&D is that everyone's always so busy, and then you never meet up and do anything again, but it really helps in terms of world-building and improvisation and understanding the process of creating collaboratively with others," says Kazuma Hashimoto, a trans Japanese-to-English translator and game critic. "Because a lot of it's on the fly and making and defining your own rules and game systems when you want to homebrew something."

Hashimoto sketches out a brief history of D&D's influence on game development, mentioning how Bioware, the studio behind the fantasy role-playing

series Dragon Age, worked on the original Baldur's Gate, and over the years, other developers continued to emulate this high fantasy setting.

Japanese role-playing games also picked up this mantle with Dragon Quest games, which Hashimoto describes as a "Japanese homebrew of Dungeons & Dragons."

"It's everywhere," Hashimoto says. "Someone overseas may be like, 'Oh, I want to do that, but it's not in my language. So I'm going to homebrew the setting."

Those early Japanese role-playing games went on to inspire more, further embedding Dungeons & Dragons in the fabric of gaming.

Having D&D experience in the back pocket can be a helpful touchstone for video game developers to have a shared vision of what sort of game they are trying to make years before it comes together.

That can be a very useful shorthand when designers are banging their heads together for years on end in a highly collaborative process where everything is bespoke and piecemeal.

"It's amazing that something that's made by hundreds of different people has any consistency at all, and yet it does. It has a coherent tone; it hangs together," Schick said. "And yet, every single thing in it was not made to a formula. It was handcrafted by artisans who understood the job. They just knew what we were making, and without watching them too closely, they just made the right stuff. It's a miracle, really."

When I bring up to Schick that while the Larian developers don't have a formula or template, they do have a shared inspiration of Dungeons & Dragons, he agrees that it's a good point.

"We all are living with this stuff as much as we possibly can and exchanging ideas and talking," Schick said. "So that's all our collective gift to the player. And so there's a lot of positive groupthink in the design process." ■

↘
Top to bottom: Dragon Age: Inquisition, Kentucky Route Zero: TV Edition, Dragon Quest (Switch), Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition

INTERVIEW

On Foreign Soil

Catching up with the head of Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

BY BLAKE HESTER

The Like a Dragon series is having a moment. Well, its moment has been happening for the last seven years. Ever since Yakuza 0 in 2017, people have been paying attention to the once-niche-outside-of-Asia crime series. Things hit a fever pitch in 2020 with Yakuza: Like a Dragon, and now with its sequel, Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth, publisher Sega and developer Ryu Ga Gotoku (RGG) are seemingly sparing no expense capitalizing on its success, buying full-page ads in the *New York Times*, flashy celebrity social media campaigns, and more.

Infinite Wealth is very good (read our review on p. 78) and already vastly outselling other games in the series. It's also, notably, the first entry not to take place solely in Japan; it splits its time between Japan and Hawaii in the United States.

So, with a bit of time to talk with Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio's director Masayoshi Yokoyama, we touched base on the game's themes, the series' popularity, and where it all goes from here.

Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio director Masayoshi Yokoyama

Despite its heavy themes of the need for criminal rehabilitation, surprisingly, Yokoyama does not believe RGG has a strong message or stance on said topics.

"Right now in Japan, yakuza, or organized criminals who have fallen off the so-called beaten path or the normal path that is expected of society, they do indeed have a harder time reintegrating into society because of different types of laws or different cultural norms that almost ostracize him. So, in present day, former organized criminals have to go even deeper into that world. Whereas if you rewind the clock a little bit, yakuza could walk in the streets, whereas now it's become more difficult.

"So all that context provided, I still say what we do is create entertainment, so we can't answer that question. We try to imagine what that life may be like and take that as sort of a fictional backdrop. And if the fans play the game, and superimpose that on top of reality, or draw some kind of conclusion, or are able to extract something from it and be entertained, then that's great for us, but we don't take a stance; there is no right or wrong. It's just what is entertaining as a video game for us."

Early in production, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic limited the team from doing research trips. It found creative solutions.

"We actually worked with production companies in Hawaii, and they helped us through the scouting process, location hunting process. So certain days, they would get to the car and drive around the city and be showing us video footage in real time. And we asked them, 'Hey, can you turn over there? Can you point the camera in that direction? Hey, I want to see what's over there.' So that was our sort of R&D process for Infinite Wealth."

RGG released three Like a Dragon games in the span of 12 months. Why aren't fans fatigued by such an intense release schedule?

"I think perhaps there is enough differentiation. I mean, one was a historical spin-off, one was an action game [featuring Kazuma Kiryu], the other was an RPG, Infinite Wealth. And of course, there were certain voices or opinions within Sega that said, 'Hey, do you think we're overdoing it? Do you think we're diluting the franchise too much?' But I didn't necessarily feel so, so I pushed back and said, 'The bottom line is, the developers, we, the team, we're having fun making all of these games.' And I think us having fun during the development process translates to audiences and fans having fun when it ultimately is available to download and play. And you can tell [with] certain games, even during the development process that fun factor starts to dissipate. Those are the games that I think are [in] the most danger of, once they're released, fans feeling that lack of fun, so to speak."

Having now written and overseen the stories of the Like a Dragon series for two decades, does Yokoyama think he's grown as a writer?

"I actually wonder myself because I don't often have time to look back and have a very direct comparison. It's hard to say for me.

"All that being said, social media, if that's any guide, whether on X or Twitter or whatever you wanna call it, I do get a lot of hate mail. 'Oh, I hate your scenario, it sucks.' Versus comments that say, 'I loved your story.' It's overwhelmingly negative. But in spite of that, the popularity of the games seems to be expanding and the commercial success is there. So maybe it's a vocal minority? I don't know. But if I strictly judge my writing off of the comments on [social media] – I don't know. I just have to get used to it."

After the success of Infinite Wealth, where does RGG go next? How does it build upon the biggest game it's ever made?

"Honestly, I don't really know. And part of that is because every game we approach, we approach it as though it might be our last game. And there's a couple of reasons for this. First, whenever thinking about a game or whatever it is we're developing, what's in front of us, I try not to leave anything on the table. I don't have certain setups that we're going to have a payoff three games later or certain world building. We build and we put everything out there on each game that is in front of us that we are developing in that moment.

"The second is, if the game doesn't sell, there's not going to be a sequel. So what's the point in [putting] too much thought [in]to it? And all the plans, all the setups, everything you did could become useless anyway, so why leave it on the table? Put it in this game. And again, Netflix, Amazon, they've proven there's so many series that are canceled after season one. And I think even after the first episode, they look at the drop off in views and they determine, 'Hey, this series is gonna get greenlit for these many seasons or not.' So unless we make sure the game that's right in front of us is a commercial success, thinking of too far in the future isn't really going to yield that much benefit, because you don't know." ■

RETROSPECTIVE

TURTLE POWER!

On the 40th anniversary of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, we look back at the enduring series' impact on video games **BY BRIAN SHEA**

In the 1980s, an unexpected team of four anthropomorphic turtles turned the entertainment industry upside-down. Spawned by a 1984 comic released by artists and writers Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles quickly became bigger than the pages and panels that spawned them. Leonardo, Donatello, Michelangelo, and Raphael soon found themselves the kings of Saturday morning cartoons, the stars of the highest-grossing independent film to date, and the figureheads for a massive toy empire. But for all their successes in other areas, when the Turtles invaded the still-young video game industry, they left an indelible mark.

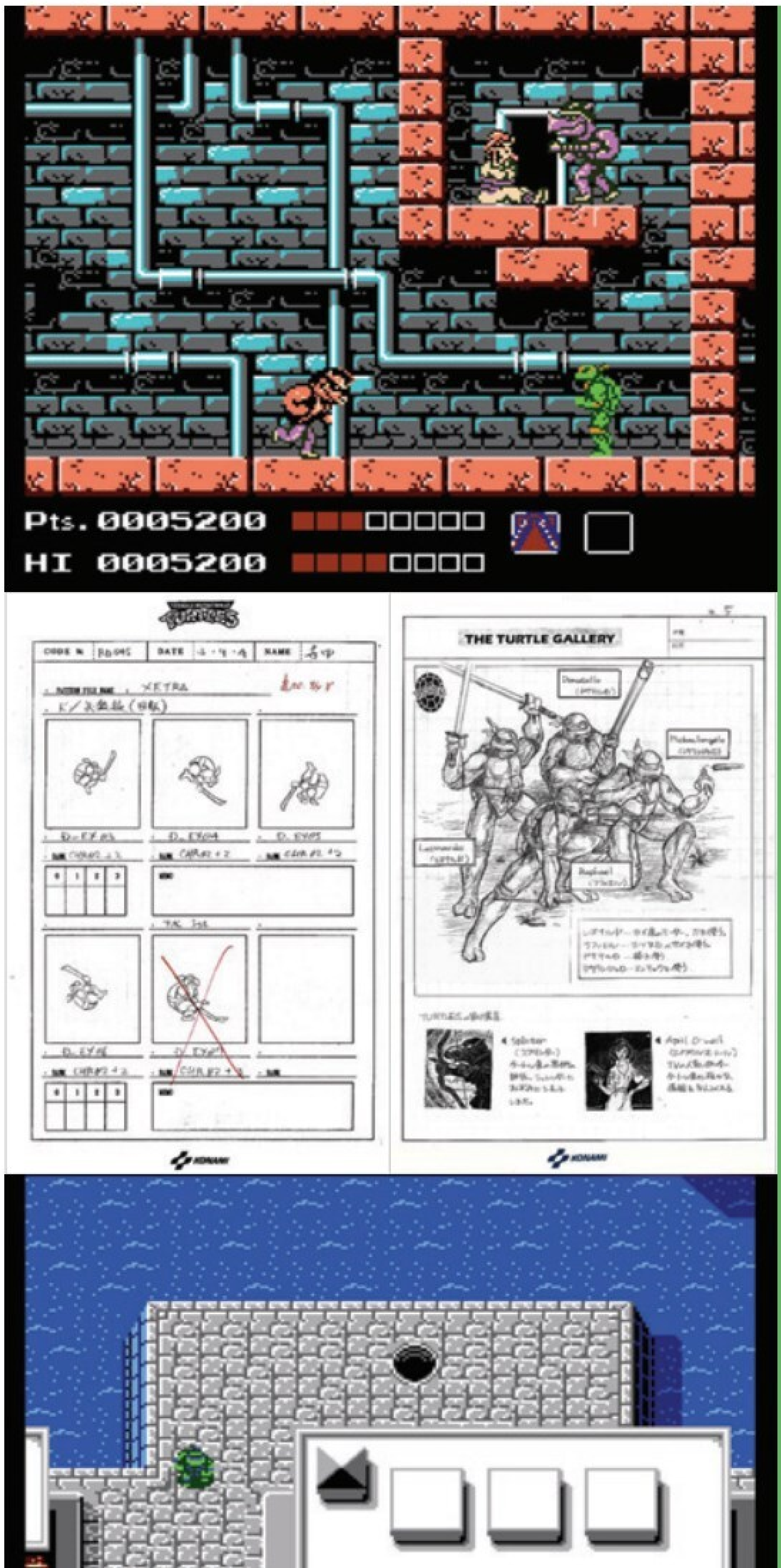
COMING OUT OF THEIR SHELLS

When the Turtles were bursting onto the scene and starting their rapid ascent of the pop-culture ladder, video games were in a weird place. The 1983 crash was still fresh, and in the minds of many, video games were just a fad that had passed. The Nintendo Entertainment System was still a year away from making its North American debut. However, by the time the 1987 *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* animated series hit syndicated airwaves, games like Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda had demonstrated that the home console market still had some life in it.

Both Eastman and Laird drew heavy inspiration from the works of Marvel legends Jack Kirby and Frank Miller. But the inspiration goes far beyond the stories found within the pages of *Daredevil*, as Eastman learned lessons from Kirby's disputes regarding who owns the rights to characters created by artists and writers.

"A lot of these legends that we stood on the shoulders of, that inspired us, oftentimes didn't get to be involved creatively with their creations or profit from them," Eastman says. "We started self-publishing; at the time, there was a real movement towards creative control and character control and IP control, if you will. We were lucky that we had early success with the comics; the dream had come true for us, following those footsteps, making a living, drawing comic books successfully, so we were aware if we had the opportunity to do something like the cartoon or the toys or a video game or many other things, we wanted to have control over that approval down to the characters, the likenesses of the characters, and the kind of stories."

That sentiment carried forward to any licensing deal involving the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, no matter how big or small. Whether it was role-playing games and toys or lunchboxes and glow-in-the-dark t-shirts, Eastman and Laird wanted creative control. That's why, in 1987, when Konami approached the duo for a licensing deal involving both home and arcade video games, the co-creators were adamant about being involved.



1989

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles for the NES

Top and bottom: screenshots; middle: concept art

THE KONAMI YEARS

"Konami was one of the first ones that approached us and they seemed sincere and, I'll say, politely aggressive in that," Eastman says. "We were a little naïve and very cocky and knew just enough to be dangerous and want to protect our creation. And so, with Konami, we said, 'This is what we want,' and they said, 'Great. Yep. We'll do that. We'll work with you. We want you to be involved in it. You've created something that has become successful, and we want to know why and treat it right to make sure it translates.' It was positive from the earliest stages."

In working with Konami, the duo strived to balance the tone, as the comic was geared towards adults, while the new animated series and toys were created for children. Konami released two titles in 1989, both simply called Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The first one was a single-player action game for the NES developed by subsidiary Ultra Games, where players must conquer various challenges in both side-scrolling and top-down formats – an innovative concept at the time – to save their reporter friend April O'Neil and Master Splinter from the evil Shredder's clutches.

"The comic book influence of the NES [game] is very strong; the cover itself is from [an alternate cover of] issue number 4, in which they had red bandanas," Konami producer Charles Murakami, who worked on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection, says. "You could see the influence of the TV show because there's Rocksteady and Bebop and [in the game] the turtles have different colored bandanas. But it's kind of like this mix between the two but with a very heavy comic book influence, so that kind of explains a lot of why there's so much strangeness in that game."

Riding the momentum of the animated series, the NES title was a huge success, selling more than 4 million cartridges by the end of 1990. However, the title was criticized for some extremely difficult segments, the most notorious of which is an underwater level where players must swim through electrified seaweed to disarm bombs before a timer runs out. "When the NES game came out, we would have people approach us at conventions and different appearances that Peter and I would do and be very angry with us because why did we make it so hard to play?" Eastman says with a chuckle. "And Peter and I were like, 'We can't even win!' To this day, I still haven't gotten through the water level! I tried a lot, but they were really challenging!"

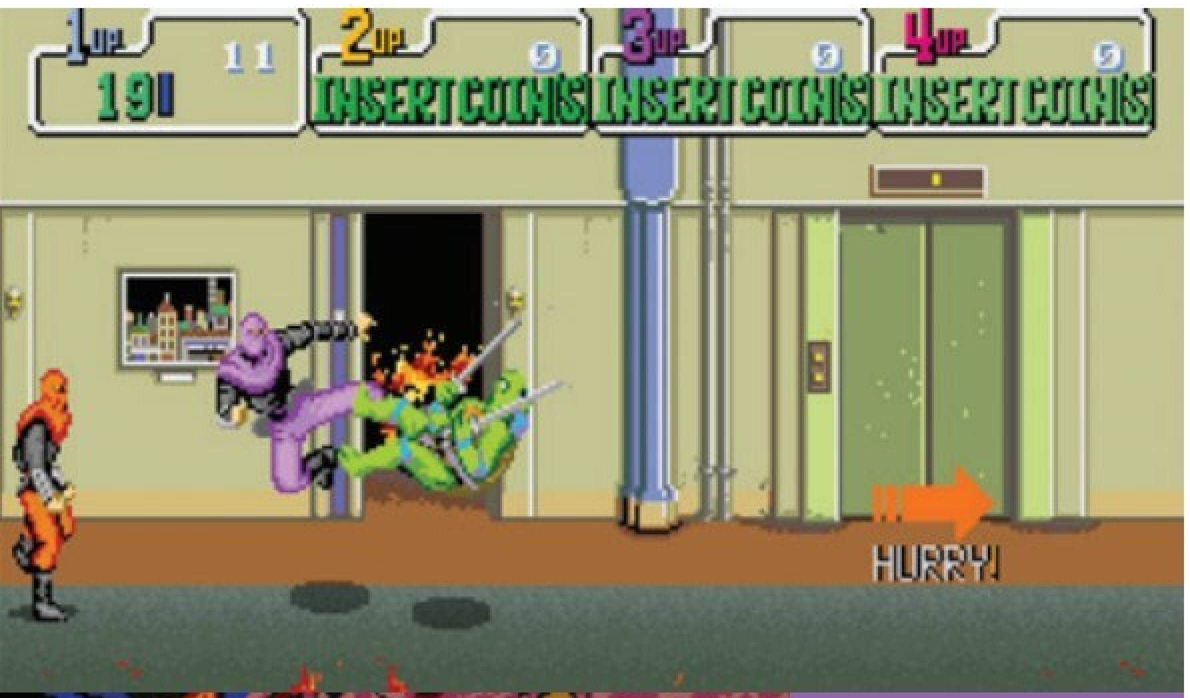
Thankfully, for people who are like the co-creators and couldn't get past that early section, that wasn't the only Ninja Turtles game released by Konami in 1989. Arriving in arcades that fall, the

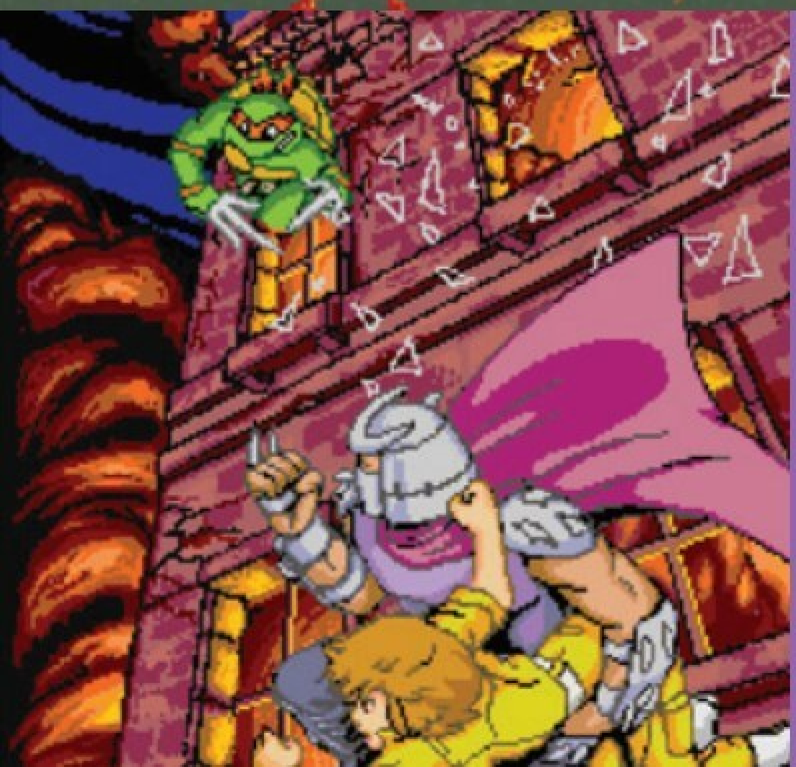
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles arcade title fell more in line with what fans of the cartoon expected.

Colorful graphics, big character models, and enhanced audio showcased the gap between console and arcade technology at the time. But it was the gameplay that truly set the '89 arcade game apart from the rest of what was available. Konami expertly blended the side-scrolling beat 'em up genre with the license to create an experience that captivated imaginations. When you added in the four-player simultaneous co-op functionality and speedy, fluid action, it was a match made in heaven. As a bonus, Eastman could play and make progress in the arcade game thanks to the more linear gameplay – a shared sentiment for many less-gaming-inclined Turtles fans.

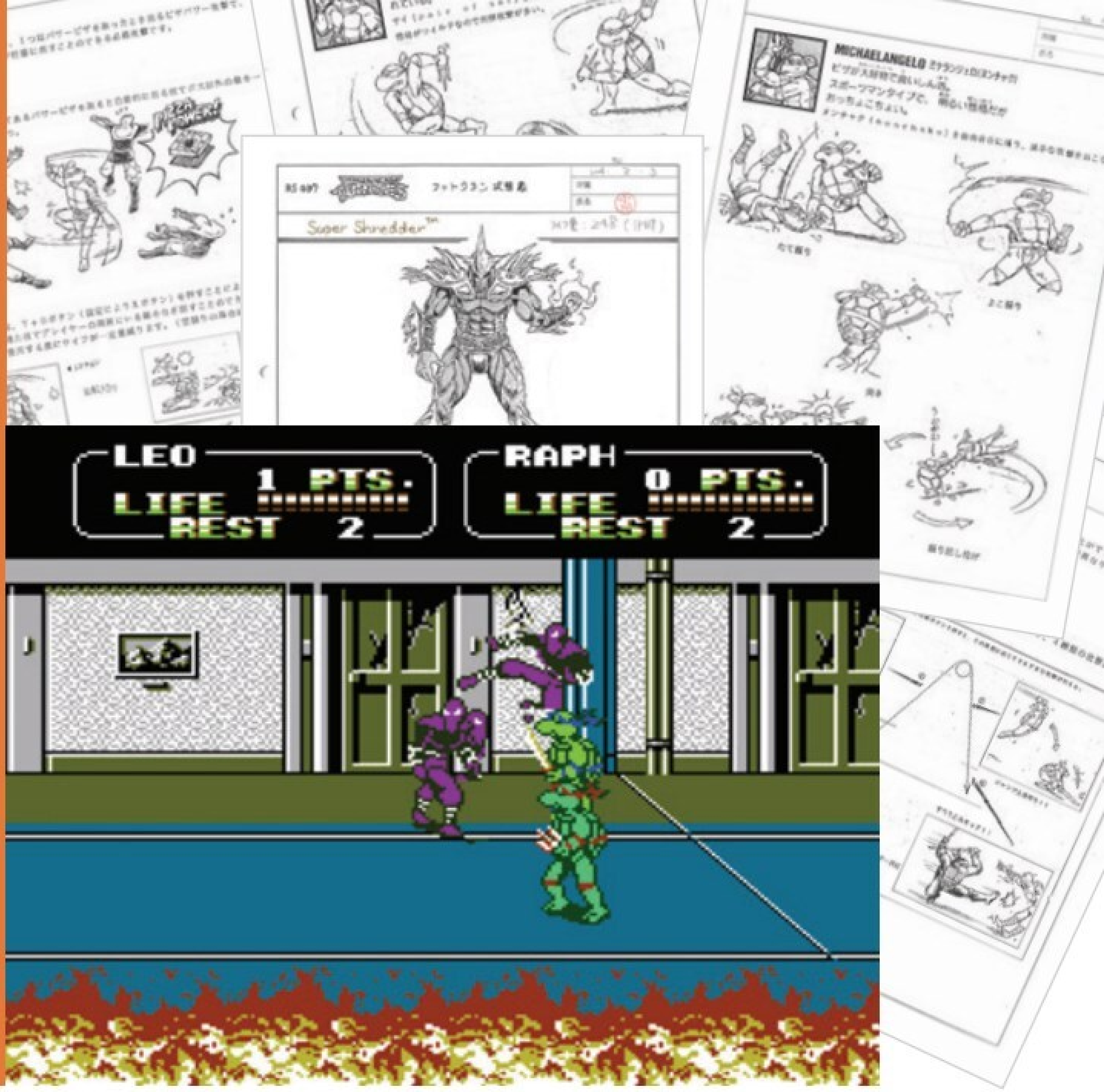
The title became one of the highest-grossing arcade cabinets of the '90s and was ported to NES in 1990 under the name Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game with added content. Not only that, but it inspired a generation of side-scrolling beat 'em up cooperative arcade titles, many of which were also developed by Konami. In 1991, Konami used the format established by TMNT '89 to release a beloved title based on popular adult cartoon *The Simpsons*, but it was the 1992 X-Men arcade game from Konami that caught Eastman's attention.

"It's sort of like brain-exploding, humbling, just super cool all at the same time because that was, again, going back to our inspirations of Jack Kirby. I grew up a huge Daredevil fan, Captain America, Batman," Eastman says. "This full circle moment of having something as popular as the X-Men and things that were a big influence on us growing up was pretty surreal."





1989
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (arcade game)



1990
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game

THE NEXT MUTATION

During this era, the Turtles business was booming, and Konami was prolific in capitalizing on it. In addition to its console and arcade titles, the company also released a trilogy of Game Boy games – Fall of the Foot Clan in 1990, Back from the Sewers in 1991, and Radical Rescue in 1993 – as well as several handheld electronic games, a title for DOS, and a third NES title called Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III: The Manhattan Project.

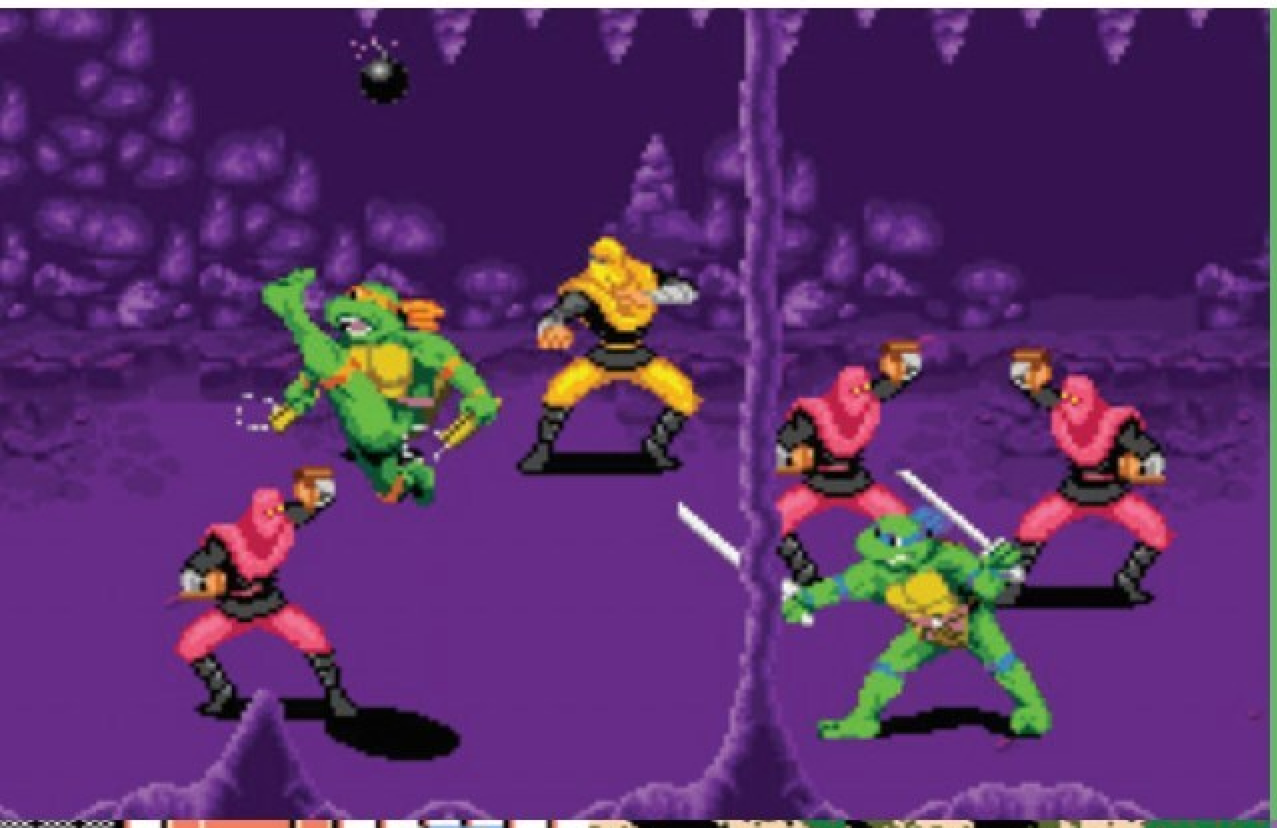
Manhattan Project is well-liked and pushed the gameplay established by the original arcade game and its NES port forward. However, it was somewhat overshadowed by another Konami-developed Turtles title released around that same time. Turtles in Time debuted in arcades in 1991 and was released on SNES in 1992, just months after Manhattan Project hit NES.

"The Super NES is out, so a lot of the focus is on the Super Nintendo [game], but Turtles III has its own story, its own unique controls – nothing beats stabbing [enemies] and chucking them off a bridge – it's one of the most fun games for NES," Murakami says. "Turtles in Time was in the arcade and it got translated to the Super NES. [...] I think that's why Manhattan Project might have been a little forgotten."

Turtles in Time's arcade release was an instant classic due to its flashy graphics, expressive characters, and stellar battles, but for many, the SNES release is the pinnacle of side-scrolling brawlers, even if it was limited by the console only having two controller ports and was not quite able to handle all the animations and 3D elements of the arcade version. To make up for it, the SNES version included several new levels, boss battles, enemy types, and modes.

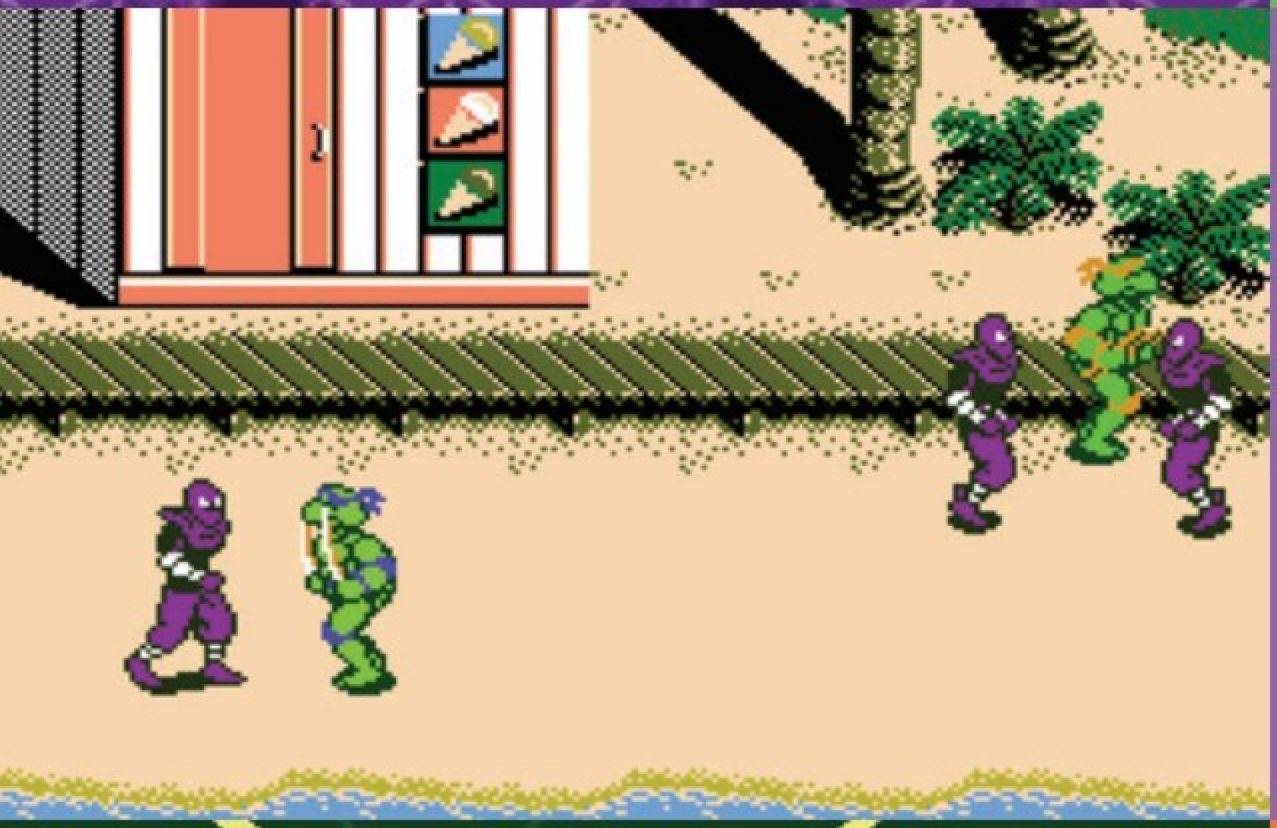
Konami had a major hit on its hands, and it wanted to expand its audience even more. The NES couldn't handle the visual fidelity of Turtles in Time, but the Sega Genesis could. However, there were various parts of the SNES port that utilized the SNES's Mode 7 scrolling effect. Add the fact that, while the NES and SNES had their own specific TMNT titles, the Genesis did not have an exclusive game, and it made the most sense for Konami to create something based on Turtles in Time, but completely its own.

The resulting title was The Hyperstone Heist, a game based on Turtles in Time, but with faster gameplay and fewer stages. However, each stage is longer, with inspiration pulled from both arcade games. Hyperstone Heist wasn't built from the ground up, but by utilizing the unique strengths of the Genesis console, it carved its own identity while simultaneously adding to the legacy of what many consider to be the greatest TMNT game of all time.



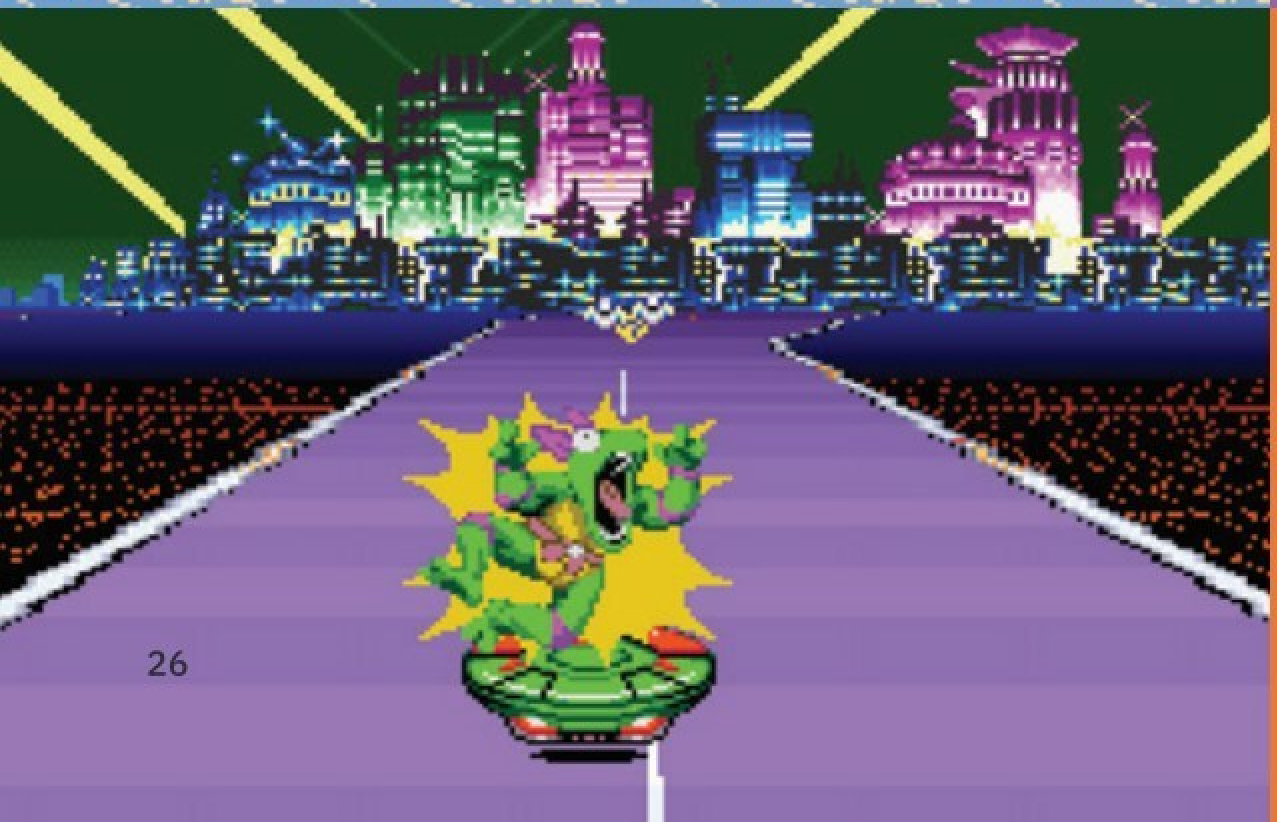
1991

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time (Arcade)



1991

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III: The Manhattan Project



1992

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV: Turtles in Time (SNES)

BRINGING A SAI TO A STREET FIGHT

Coming off the great heights achieved by the arcade and console games of the late '80s and early '90s, Konami began looking for the next evolution of the Turtles. Inspired by the out-of-control popularity of Street Fighter II, Konami leveraged its license of the TMNT brand to capitalize on the fighting game craze. Originally mapped out in design documents as "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles V," the games that would go on to become Tournament Fighters started digging deeper into the Turtles' character roster with mutants that had only appeared in the Archie Comics series to that point.

And now that the brand had a following across three major platforms – SNES, Genesis, and NES – Konami wanted to capitalize on the large audience. However, with each console having different capabilities, that meant creating three distinct versions of Tournament Fighters.

The SNES version ended up being the most well-received of the trio thanks to its adherence to the Street Fighter II formula, but the Genesis version also found an audience thanks to its Mortal Kombat inspiration that included being able to break through stages. Much like Manhattan Project before it, the NES version of Tournament Fighters is an oft-forgotten entry thanks to the newer platform versions. But the NES version is, in spite of its technical limitations, still a solid version of the title and serves as Konami's final addition to its storied NES library.

Despite each iteration having its own positives and negatives, the Super NES Tournament Fighters stands out as the clear fan favorite and remains a well-liked fighter to this day. However, while the Turtles license was mostly experiencing success to this point, fortunes were about to change for everyone's favorite Manhattan mutants.

BACK TO THE SEWERS

After the success of Tournament Fighters and the IP's transposition to an entirely new genre, the TMNT brand felt unstoppable, particularly in the realm of video games. However, the brand began noticing a mainstream decline. In March 1993, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III*, the second sequel to the beloved 1990s live-action film, hit theaters to awful reviews and worse fan reception. Meanwhile, 1993 was also when the original animated series underwent massive changes in tone and number of episodes per season.

Additionally, despite the runaway success of the games, 1993 marked the final home console or dedicated handheld video game release for TMNT for 10 years. "It was a period of the Turtles where it had its peak in the early '90s and it slowly did this kind of tapering off through '97, '98 where, after the original cartoon series was off the air and the live-action series resonated but not enough to warrant beyond two seasons, it was kind of in a bit of a valley," Eastman says. "[I began thinking] 'Maybe that's it. Maybe we're in the discount bins now, or we're sort of gone past that."

In 2000, Eastman sold his stake in the franchise to his longtime partner Peter Laird, and he began working on other projects. During Eastman's absence, the games sector ramped back up, but with only a fraction of the success of the original titles from more than a decade ago. This time also saw the license jump from Konami to Ubisoft. Unfortunately, most of the games from both publishers received negative reviews; even a 2009 Ubisoft remake of Turtles in Time drew heavy criticism.

Eastman attributes this to the ballooning game budgets and reliance on original IPs created by studios in the mid-to-late '90s. "It wasn't, 'Hey here's a popular franchise, let's adapt it into a video game.' A lot of the video games weren't based on that, they were based on original concepts like Metal Gear Solid, or you could name a wild number of games that would develop as individual unique properties and grow out the fan base from there," he says.

The one exception is a Game Boy Advance release based on the 2007 CGI film *TMNT*. While the PSP and various console versions range from 37 to 63 on review aggregate site Metacritic, the Game Boy Advance version sits at a strong score of 80.

The early games from the Turtles franchise served as a key touchpoint for the development team, particularly the '89 arcade game and Turtles in Time. "I remember spending all my lunch breaks rushing back from school, going to eat lunch really quickly, and then going across the street to my friend's house to play Turtles in Time; that's my fondest memory of video games," programmer on TMNT for Game Boy Advance Jean-François Major says. "Afterwards, I kind of knew I was going to video games, but I never really thought there would ever be a chance I would work on a Turtles game. To me, that was like a dream."

Despite his love for the classic multiplayer Turtles gameplay, the limitations of the Game Boy Advance made the team focus on single-player action while still relying on the classic games' inspiration. It worked, as the chaotic beat 'em up was well-received. Three years later, Major and his team at Ubisoft Montreal were able to realize their vision for multiplayer action in what many consider one of the best modern games in the genre, Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game.

Meanwhile, on the Turtles side, Laird decided it was time for him, too, to move on. In 2009, he sold the franchise to Viacom (now known as Paramount Global), who started the comics back up under IDW Publishing, even bringing Eastman back as a writer and artist. The Turtles found a new television home at the long-running children's network Nickelodeon and a video game home at Activision.

While the first few games under Paramount didn't find the kind of success it was hoping for – even the final Activision-published game, 2016's Mutants in Manhattan, which was developed by renowned studio Platinum Games, fell short of expectations – six years later, fans received a decidedly retro experience featuring a familiar face.

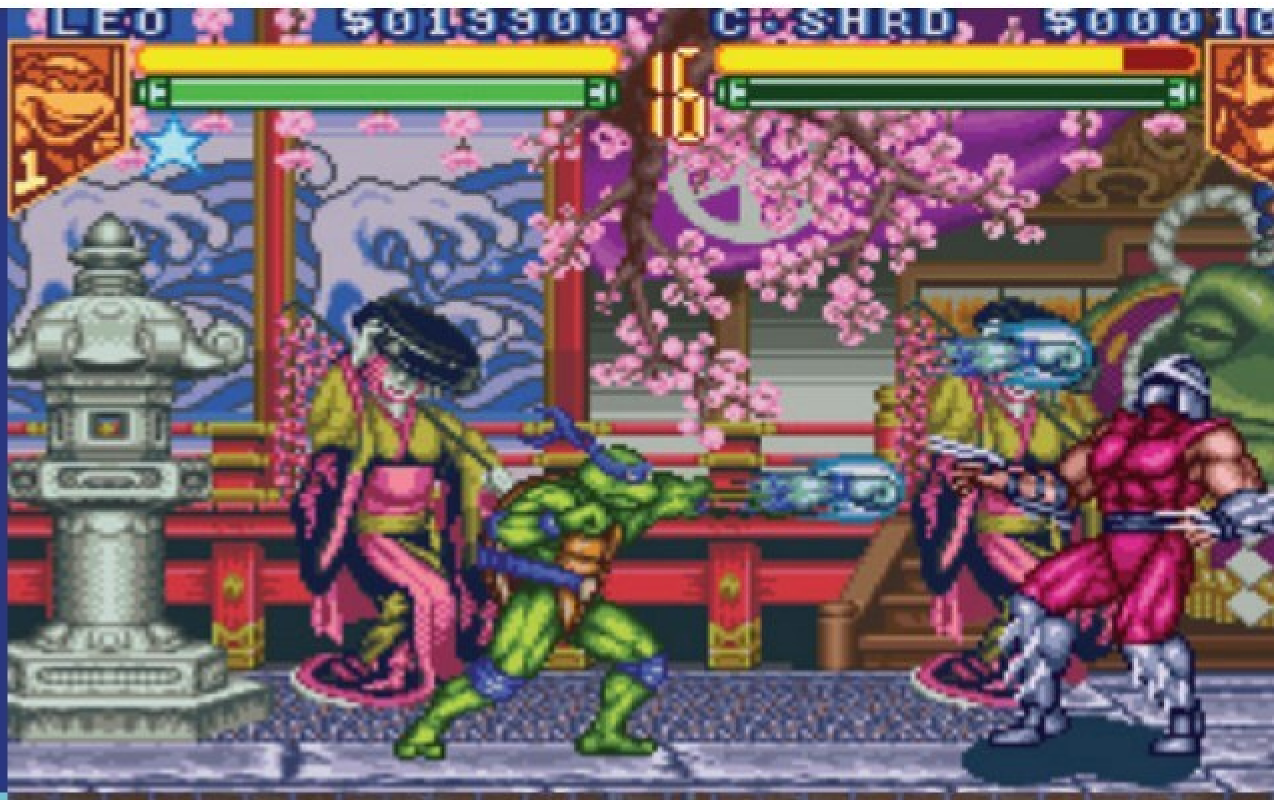
CROSSING OVER

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have a long history of starring in their own games, but their list of appearances in other video game franchises is also extensive. From Injustice 2 and Fortnite to Knockout City and Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl, the Turtles have shown they have staying power in the industry, even as guest characters.

One such game the Turtles have guested in is Blue Mammoth Games and Ubisoft's fighting game Brawlhalla. "I was thrilled; I imagine my reaction was probably very similar to a lot of folks that have done TMNT in their games because we all grew up with this stuff," art director for Brawlhalla Dave Montes says. "TMNT seems absolutely perfect for [crossovers]. There's so much nostalgia wrapped up in TMNT as well as the simple appeal of their designs. They're iconic. They're hard to forget."

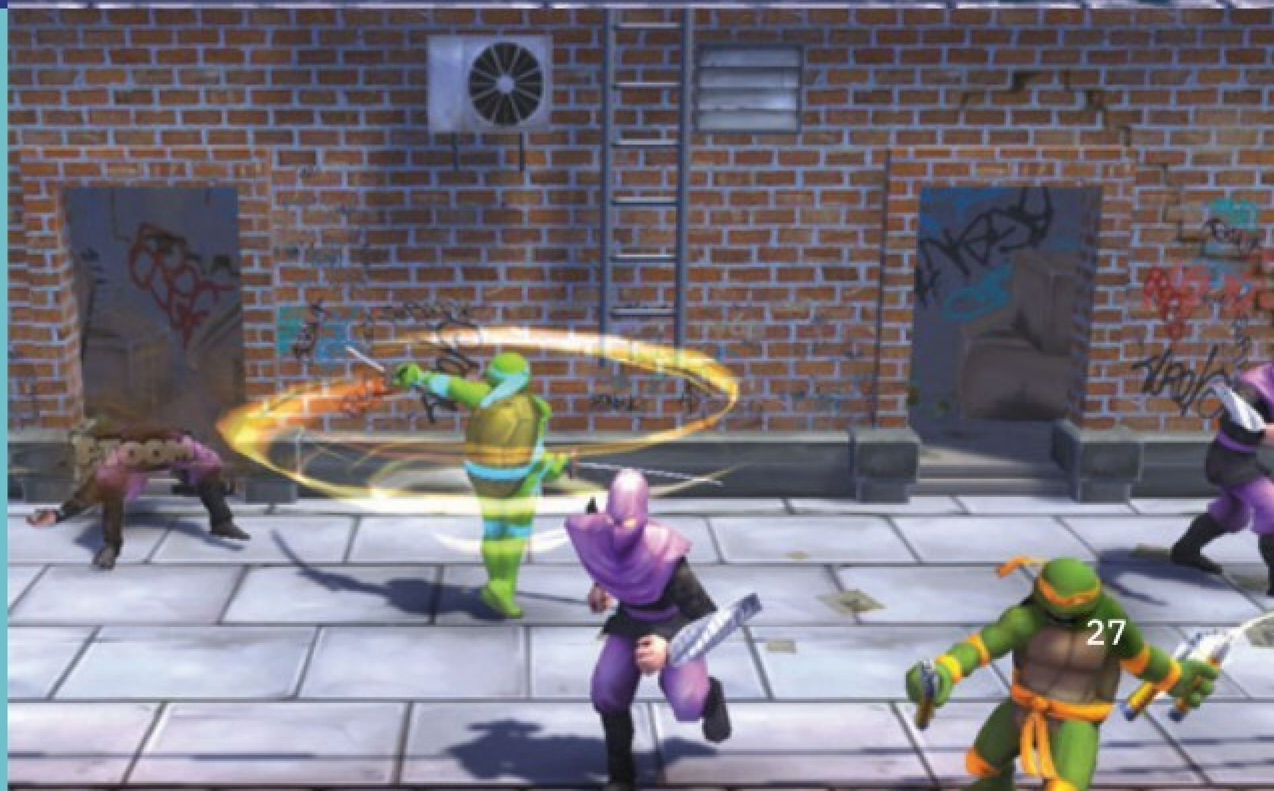
1993

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Tournament Fighters



2009

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time Re-Shelled



2016

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants in Manhattan

2022

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge

TURTLES IN (MODERN) TIME

Dotemu and Tribute Games, a studio co-founded by Major in 2011, released Shredder's Revenge, a 2022 game that feels like a true successor to the series' most beloved games. Featuring the aesthetic of the 1987 animated series (including many of the original voice actors), the 2D beat 'em up gameplay style of the original '90s games, and up to six-player cooperative play. Shredder's Revenge harkened back to the golden age of TMNT games, giving Major the chance to finally make the Turtles game of his dreams.

"The sky was the limit; there were no limitations, and we kind of had free rein on going forward with our dream," Major says. "We didn't settle on any aspect. We really invested a lot of time just to get the multiplayer aspect right, and just the fact that you can jump in and out at any point really gives it that vibe of the arcade eras."

Shredder's Revenge succeeded in being nostalgic and jam-packed with references to the Turtles' history, while also delivering a modern experience. Its approach to bringing something new to the table while also paying homage to the past resonated with fans and critics alike, earning an excellent 87 on Metacritic and holding a "Very Positive" user rating on Steam.

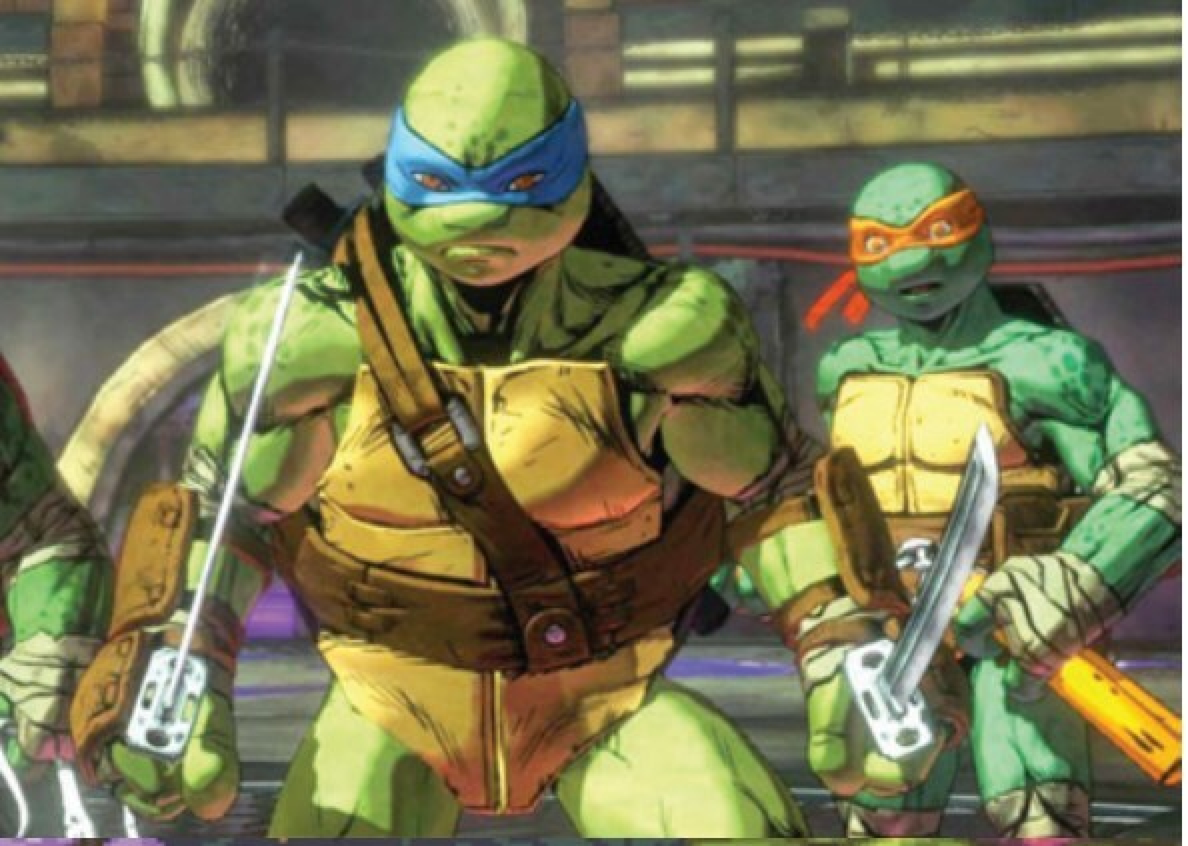
That same year, Digital Eclipse and Konami released The Cowabunga Collection, a title that gathers 13 of the most beloved Turtles games across SNES, Genesis, NES, and Game Boy on modern platforms with added features like online play.

Much like the fan base, Eastman was a fan of both 2022 releases. "Shredder's Revenge, I thought they put a lot of love into the old-school bit-form structure of the game, but a modern take on that old, classic style," he says. "It was part of the resurgence where, around that time, I was also working with Konami on The Cowabunga Collection, which was just so brilliantly fantastic. [...] I think Shredder's Revenge and the Cowabunga Collection, everything sort of fell into the right place at the right time for all that to happen with successes in other Turtle areas."

For those wanting something a bit more modern-facing, Paramount plans to play to your interests next. In 2023, a Hades-style Turtles roguelite called Splintered Fate from Super Evil Megacorp released exclusively for Apple Arcade to positive reviews, but Paramount isn't stopping there. "We knew we wanted to start with retro/classic and then as the franchise built, build on it," Paramount senior vice president of games and emerging media Doug Rosen says. "So much of what I've been focused on is really being thoughtful and not just putting out games for the sake of putting out games and licensing the IP, but trying to think of it in terms of a 5-to-10-year plan for the franchise. [...] We turn down a lot of opportunities for reasons if they don't match that. Like, I would say, right now, do we need another retro beat 'em up? I don't think so right now; we have a great one on the market. So what's the next genre that does really well?"

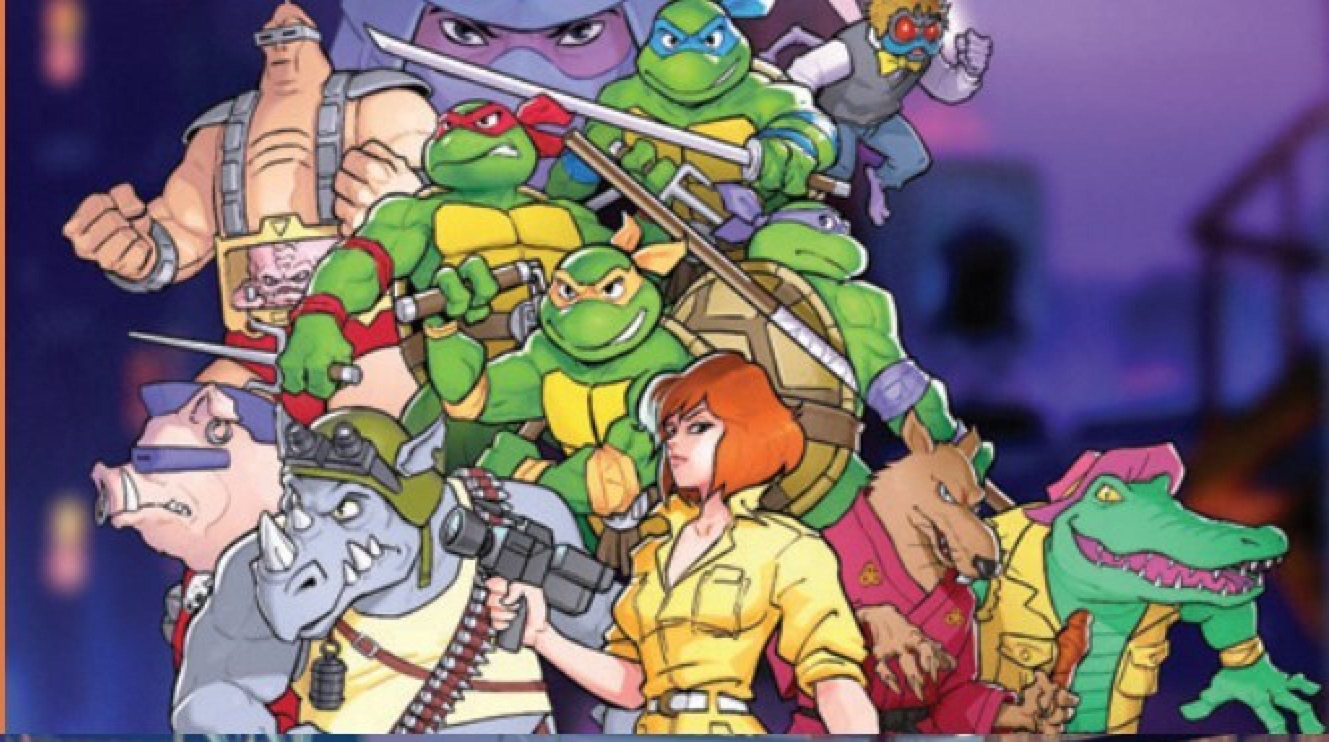
This year, players can expect to continue the adventures of the hit 2023 film *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem* in a follow-up video game from Outright Games called Mutants Unleashed, where a new wave of mutants has flooded New York, disrupting the Turtles' new happy existence after finding acceptance from society. Like many of the games in TMNT's history, each Turtle features his own play style, and players can look forward to two-player local co-op.

"That's one where it does two things: It evolves the gameplay, but it also fits really well with where the film is and other content coming," Rosen says. "It's not a movie game, but it's in that environment. The art style is beautiful and for anyone who liked the movie, it's another way in."



2022

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection



2024

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants Unleashed

COFFEE SHOP
Coffee

But Mutants Unleashed is not the only game on the horizon for the Turtles. Black Forest Games and THQ Nordic are teaming up for a single-player action title based on the dark Turtles comic miniseries *The Last Ronin*. That storyline, which ran from 2020 to 2022, takes place in an alternate future where New York City has been ravaged by ongoing battles, and the sole surviving member of the Turtles (whose identity is initially unknown) goes on a quest for vengeance.

"[Paramount] was already well down the road with the incredible *Mutant Mayhem* project, and they said, 'We'd love to do something with *The Last Ronin*, but we don't want to battle each other and take away from [*Mutant Mayhem*],'" Eastman says. "They said, 'Let's go and adapt it as a video game because we can give it all the edge and all the attitude and intensity that you did in the comic series and even go a bit deeper.' And everything I've seen – we've been interacting with the development crew – and it looks like some of the sets and some of the characters have literally walked right off the pages of the comic. So beautiful. So fantastic. And so pretty much every fan of *Last Ronin* that I've talked to is really, seriously pumped, like, 'We get to have an older version of the Turtles just for us as a video game.'"

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are among the most recognizable characters in the world of pop culture, and their impact on video games cannot be overstated. Though there was a dry period, those days seem long gone, as recent titles like Shredder's Revenge and The Cowabunga Collection have revitalized much of the love fans of the games from the '80s and '90s felt, while games like Mutants Unleashed and The Last Ronin aim to appeal to whole new generations of fans.

"It's been such a wonderful journey and adventure that, much like the original comic series and where that started and the evolution of different kinds of technologies and things that we were able to apply to the characters, a big part of the early years of the Turtles was that the video game was so huge and so big," Eastman says. "Being part of what was, at the time, emerging technology, just was really a fantastic adventure across the board."

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge and The Cowabunga Collection are available on all modern platforms. Those looking for a more arcade-style experience can also find the 1989 arcade game and Turtles in Time through Arcade1Up's cabinets.

With two well-received games and one beloved compilation in the last couple of years, plus two anticipated games on the horizon, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles game franchise is thriving for the first time since the franchise's '90s heyday. For longtime fans, it feels so good to meet video game news not with dread, but with a hearty "Cowabunga!" ■

COOL GEAR FOR SPRING

As the weather starts to heat up, we've been investigating a bevy of fascinating tech, toys, tabletop games, and more. The items we've collected ahead are some of the best we have to recommend to enrich your gaming setup, brighten your display shelves, and bring new avenues to great entertainment in your home.

BY MATT MILLER

❶ STAR WARS CAL KESTIS STATUE

As more recent additions to the canon go, few new figures in Star Wars lore have captured the imagination like Cal Kestis. The star of Respawn's Jedi: Fallen Order and Jedi: Survivor is presented here mid-battle, a transparent blue lightsaber raised to strike. The gallery diorama nails that juxtaposition of high action and constrained Jedi discipline and focus, and the cloth detailing on the PVC is exceptionally detailed. It goes without saying that BD-1 is also along for the ride, completing the picture.

$80 | *gamestop.com*

❷ PS5 DUALSENSE DEEP EARTH COLLECTION

Even with numerous more customizable options now available, the core first-party PS5 controller continues to be an excellent choice for your primary interface to games like Spider-Man 2, God of War Ragnarök, or Final Fantasy VII Rebirth. The new Deep Earth Collection keeps the function entirely unchanged but provides three enticing new color options – Volcanic Red, Cobalt Blue, and Sterling Silver. They all look great if your launch controller is finally showing its age and you're ready for that needed replacement.

$75 | *direct.playstation.com*

3
4
5
Time Travel
TRACES OF TWO PASTS
SAKURA DENSYA

❸ TIME TRAVEL DIY BOOK NOOK

If your game, book, or movie collection is starting to look a bit stale on the shelf, these novel inserts are a ton of fun. Meant to be built at home in a few hours, the finished project lights up and sits within your display as a miniature doorway into fictional worlds, which you can match to your favorite aesthetic. While the time travel train is slick, alternate options include a Japanese street scene, a house of magic, and more.

$47 | *robotimeonline.com*

❹ TRACES OF TWO PASTS: A NOVEL

It's rare that a video game tie-in novel meaningfully adds to the understanding of the fiction or makes for an enjoyable enough read to justify the time investment. But even as Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth is rolling out, there's a lot of compelling backstory to uncover here, charting the stories of Tifa and Aerith in the years before the big adventure, written with sensitivity to the characters' complexity by one of the game's chief writers, Kazushige Nojima. For dedicated fans, it helps to complete the picture and enriches your playthrough of the new game.

$25 | *na.store.square-enix-games.com*

❺ ULTIMATE ELECTRIC GO-KART

Video gaming has no shortage of kart racing games, including the perennially popular Mario Kart, which seems like a fixture of family life for decades. If a child in your family is especially excited about that brand of fun, this kid-targeted go-kart is about as close as you can get to being Mario on Rainbow Road. The kart can be speed-limited at any of its three top MPHs (2.5, 5, and 8) to customize it to the right age. The 24 Volt battery and included charger eliminates the need for gas. What's most exciting for the young target driver? The large rear wheels allow for honest-to-goodness drifting, just like in the games.

$300 | *radioflyer.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

❶ NEX PLAYGROUND

The Nex Playground doesn't tread into any fundamentally new waters with its motion-controlled, family-oriented video game platform; we've seen similar experiences from the Wii and Kinect. Instead, the tiny cube-shaped console focuses on simple and approachable motion gaming with few entry barriers, supported by a responsive wide-angle camera and AI-powered motion sensing. That goal pans out in practice with various easy-to-navigate experiences from dancing to whack-a-mole to fitness apps – all of which work well and read body movement without a problem – even with multiple players. It's simplistic fun, and the added paid subscription is a must to tap the complete library of activities, but the device definitely gets everyone moving and laughing.

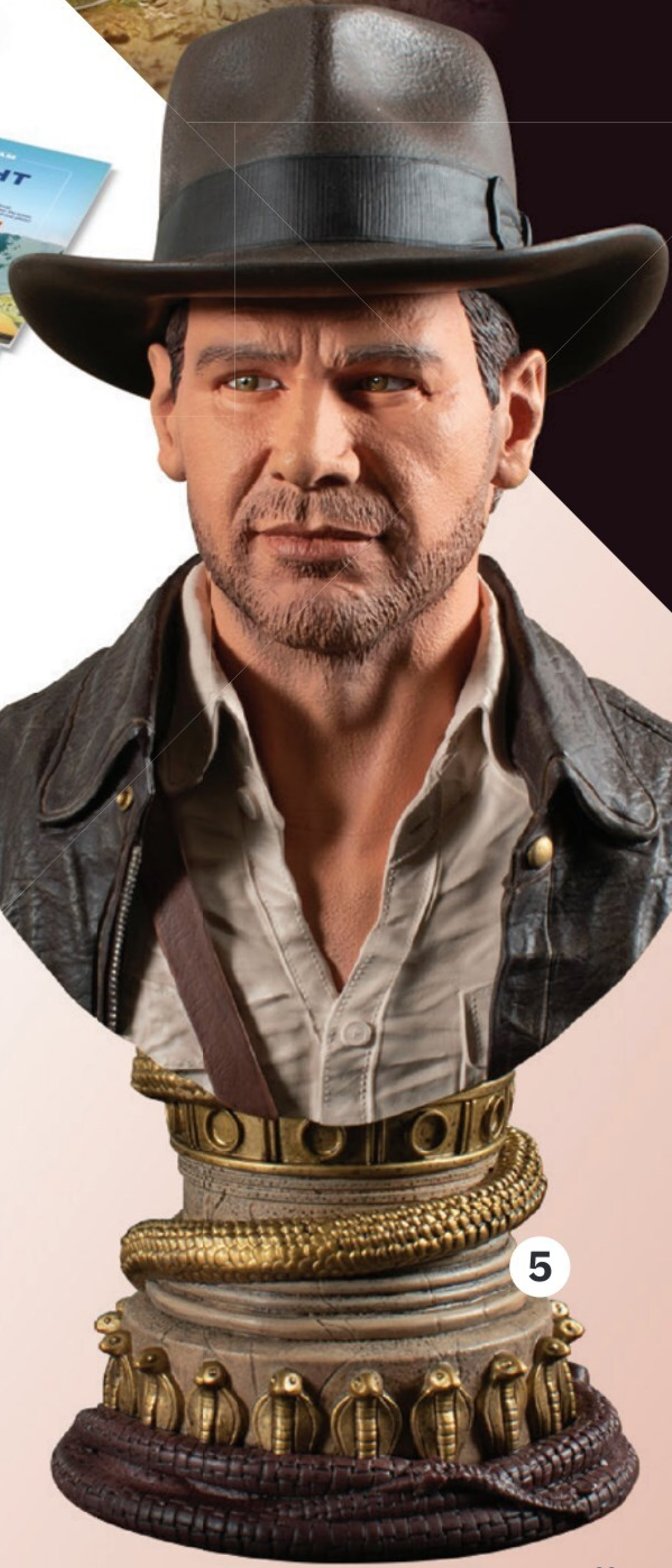
$200 | *playground.nex.inc*

❷ LEGO AVENGERS TOWER

Marvel fans need look no further for a collection centerpiece than this massive display build of the iconic building from the MCU movies. Standing just shy of three feet in height and constructed from 5201 individual pieces, the set is stuffed with easter eggs, from the appearance of the Tesseract to Arnim Zola staring out from a computer monitor. Hundreds of windows and unique display opportunities for the 31 included minifigures let you set up a proper comic book diorama filled with action and a sense of dynamic motion, making this a memorable way to celebrate a love of these familiar characters and stories.

$500 | *lego.com*

3
SKY TEAM
FLIGHT LOG



❸ SKY TEAM

The affordable pricing on this board game belies a surprisingly rich and long-lived experience that can supply many hours of fun. Built exclusively for two players, a pilot and co-pilot must work together to land an airliner at a selection of airports, placing dice out in spaces on the board to manage speed, deploy landing gear, and complete other essential tasks. Each airport has its own scenario that changes the experience, from gas leaks to high wind. It's exciting, cooperative, and easy to pick up – a perfect fit for two friends or partners looking for a great series of game nights.

$30 | *hachetteboardgames.com*

❹ ELDEN RING MELINA FIGUARTS MINI

Not every shelf-worthy collectible needs to be a towering giant. Bandai Namco's Figuarts Mini line presents fan-favorite characters in a stylized sculpt, but also with impressive poseability for figures that only stand a bit over three inches in height. As your mysterious and occasional companion through the lengthy journey of Elden Ring, Melina is a good choice for display, but you can also track down the likes of Ranni the Witch, Blaidd, or the dreaded Malenia.

$25 | *store.bandainamcoent.com*

❺ INDIANA JONES BUST

With new details finally emerging about the game Indiana Jones and the Great Circle (see pg. 52), we may once again be celebrating the adventurous spirit of the famed archaeologist and adventurer. This new bust features Doctor Jones as he appeared in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, complete with leather jacket and trademark fedora. The half-scale bust captures subtle facial features from stubble to eyes, but it's clear from his expression that he hasn't yet noticed the hated snakes wrapped around the pedestal base.

$200 | *gentlegiantltd.com*

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2

3

❶ WYRMSPAN

Wingspan is one of the most celebrated board games of the last decade, thanks to its fascinating mechanics and way of communicating a love of birds and their unique nature. That earlier success inspires this standalone project that translates the fun into a fantasy setting and an enduring enthusiasm for that most iconic mythical creature – the dragon. Players build and maintain a dragon sanctuary, gradually trying to draw more species of wyrms to their caves. Multiple strategies can lead to victory, lending the game powerful replay value. The art and overall production value are top-notch, making it a joyful game to look at spread out on your table.

$65 | *store.stonemaiergames.com*

❷ DISPLAY VAULT AIR

Longtime collectors of Funko Pops may like the united visual style of the popular figures, but it can be tricky to find a good approach to display. Vaulted Vinyl's solution is an elegant way to help your treasures look their best. Each vault includes tailored spaces that perfectly fit a standard Pop box, though the individual slots are also perfectly sized for unboxed characters. Because it uses high-density foam in a carbon fiber finish, the unit is light enough to mount easily on the wall but also has an understated, slick visual style that helps your favorite Pops stand out.

$95 | *vaulted-vinyl.com*

❸ TIMBUK2 X ASTRO GAMING BACKPACK

If you find a significant portion of your gaming hobby is played on the go, a confident storage and transport solution is a must – bonus points for style. The BP35 backpack is specifically built for carrying your gaming gear, whether as a flight carry-on or just across town. The roomy sleeves can handle two separate laptops up to 16" in size. A padded interior pocket has space for more sensitive gear. There's a loop holder for headset hanging, a front magnetic flap pocket for easy access items, and dual zippered side pockets for water bottles (or whatever else you'd like to imbibe).

$200 | *timbuk2.com*

❹ TCL QM8 SERIES

For many years, TCL has been quietly pumping out excellent gaming TVs priced much lower than the competition, even if the full feature set isn't necessarily at the bleeding edge of the available tech. The company's flagship QM8 series takes another step up, providing gamers and cinema lovers a desirable option, often regularly available at sale prices below both the competition and the list price we show here. An extremely bright display uses QLED Mini LED technology to create many local dimming zones across the screen, leading to phenomenal contrast between deep blacks and rich, vibrant colors. It's an easy recommendation if you're ready for your next step up and want a meaningful advancement without completely breaking the bank.

$1,700 (65-inch) | *tcl.com*

❺ THE WALKING DEAD UNIVERSE ROLEPLAYING STARTER SET

Mature role-playing gamers looking for a change of pace should consider a trip into the dark and dramatic arena of Free League's new Walking Dead game. Set in the same shared universe as the shows, it won't surprise you to learn that characters are fragile and prone to sudden deaths as they deal with the many dangers of a Walker-filled world. The Year Zero engine that drives the game is flexible and rewarding, modified here to tell cinematic and tense survival stories. The Starter Set gives you a taste of the action, getting you into danger quickly with six pre-generated characters, including some favorites from the TV show. The boxed set is a good way to test the system first to find if a more robust RPG campaign down the line fits your group.

$42 | *freeleaguepublishing.com*

5
WALKING DEAD UNIVERSE
ROLEPLAYING STARTER SET

❻ QRD STELLAR T3 WIRELESS JOY-PAD FOR SWITCH

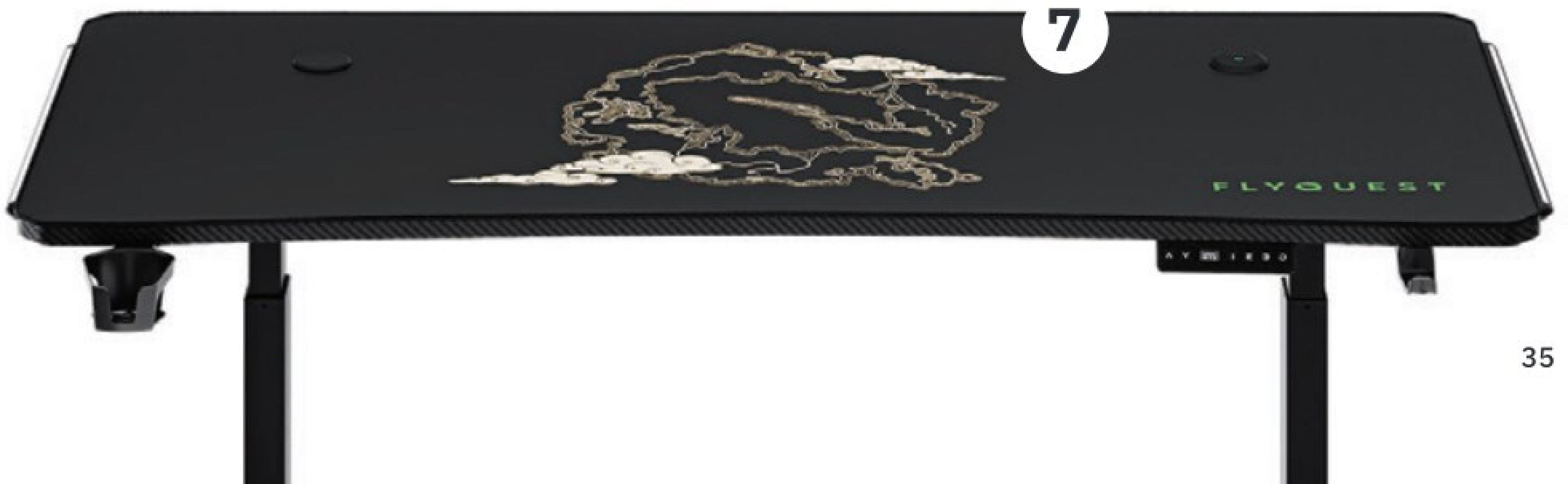
Even many years into its lifecycle, the Switch's capability as both a docked TV console and handheld continues to be one of its standout features. But it's hard to cite the Joy-Cons as especially popular due to their small size and uncomfortable hand fit. QRD's T3 controller is a notable step up, usable as a pad while on your TV or slotted into the Switch for handheld play. Hall effect joysticks, customizable LED lights, and a back macro button are all pluses. Still, the real win (especially for adult players) is the larger size, which makes games far more enjoyable to play over long stretches than the original Joy-Cons.

$59 | *qrdgame.com*

❼ ANDASEAT FLYQUEST EDITION GAMING DESK

Whether you're familiar with the eSports partnership team involved or not, AndaSeat's Gaming Desk is a solid and feature-rich option for your PC setup. Adjustable height permits platform height between 2'5" and 3'11", allowing for standing or seated play and work with just a few button presses. Customizable LED lighting helps set your preferred ambiance. A comfortable and sturdy desk mat keeps everything in place and moving smoothly. And while not strictly necessary, the inclusion of a cupholder, headset rack, and cable management options are all welcome additions. ■

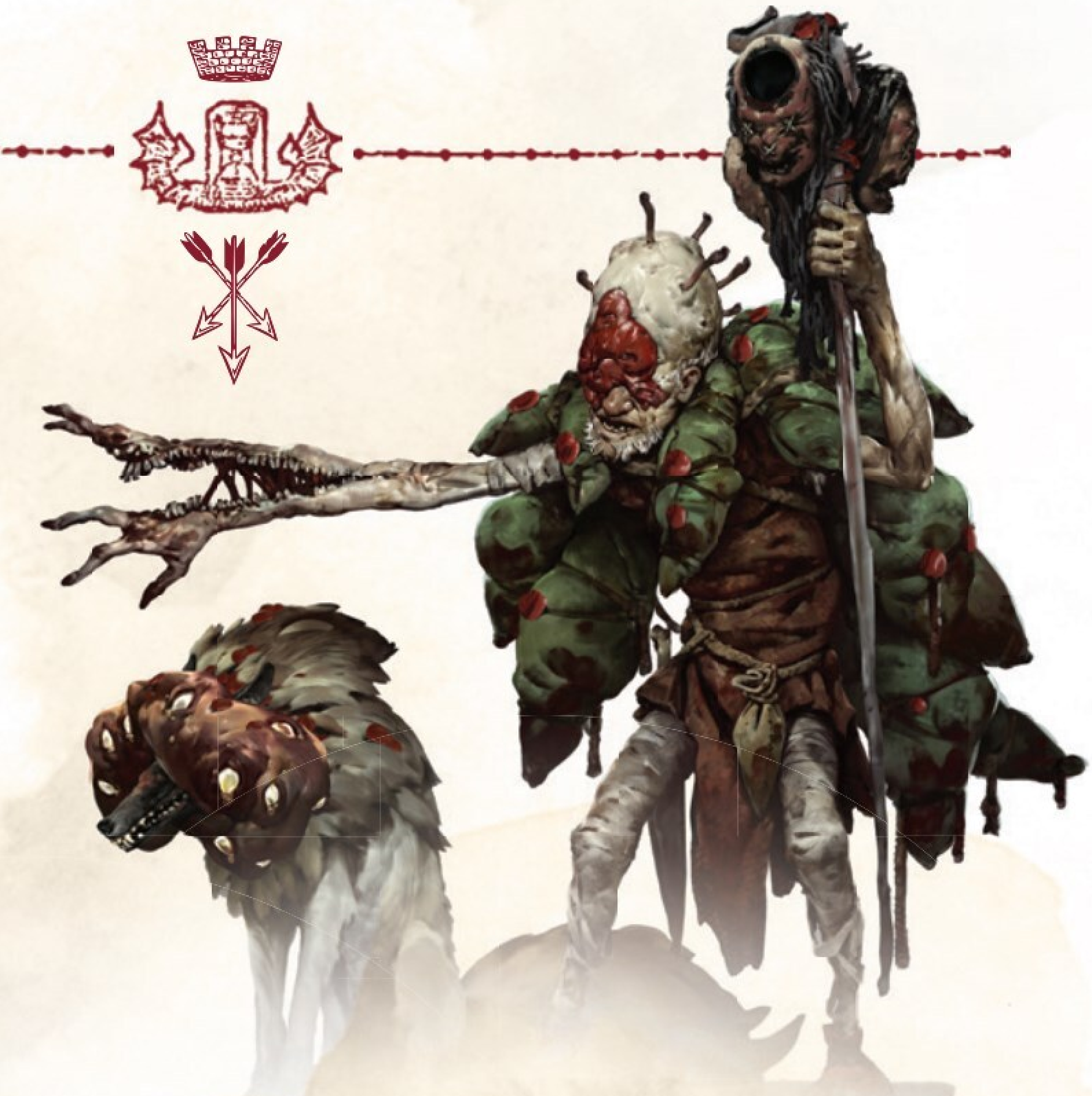
$450 | *andaseat.com*



A WICKED REINVENTION

Moon Studios leaves Ori behind to craft its dream Action RPG, No Rest For the Wicked

BY MARCUS STEWART



In 2015, Moon Studios garnered the attention of the game industry

with Ori and the Blind Forest, a beautiful and challenging fantasy platformer that stood as one of the finest modern Metroidvanias. Moon topped itself with Ori and the Will of the Wisps, a staggering sequel that expanded and improved every element of its predecessor. But as the Ori games collected acclaim and accolades, Moon quietly chipped away at a bigger passion project – one that Moon hopes will redefine the action RPG genre.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)
PUBLISHER Private Division **DEVELOPER** Moon Studios
RELEASE April 18 (PC Early Access), TBA (PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S)

REALIZING A DARK FANTASY

On a chilly street alley in Vienna, Austria, I stand before a pair of beautiful glass double doors emblazoned with Moon Studios' logo. Upon being buzzed in, the sight before me betrays this seemingly corporate exterior. I step into what is essentially a messy living room. A TV stand littered with consoles from various eras surrounds a large television. Various knicknacks lay strewn about, including a personal weight set. A thick tobacco smoke odor blankets the room.

If I didn't know better, I'd think I'd accidentally stepped into a gamer's dorm room after a nightlong play session. That is probably somewhat accurate. In reality, I'm at the home/work studio of Thomas Mahler, co-founder of Moon Studios. I'm here to see its next project, the action RPG No Rest for the Wicked.

Joining me is Moon's other co-founder and CEO, Gennadiy Korol. We sit on a couch, waiting for Thomas to descend from his upstairs apartment. Coincidentally, the first-floor "living room" we currently occupy used to be a tobacco store before Mahler (who smokes a pipe) purchased the space and renovated it into Moon's de facto headquarters. A recording studio in the adjacent room was once a local barbershop. This more intimate venue stems from the fact that the studio, founded in 2009, has operated remotely since its inception and, thus, has no real home office. Mahler lives in Vienna, while Korol resides in Tel Aviv, Israel. Dozens of other Moon employees are scattered across the globe.

The co-founders have worked together since meeting online in 2004. Mahler worked at Blizzard at the time, while Korol once created artists' tools for the film industry. Seeking new ventures and sharing a desire to make games, the pair founded Moon Studios, which has become one of the premier indie teams thanks to its work on Ori and the Blind Forest and Ori and the Will of the Wisps. Mahler's home has a glass case enshrining numerous industry awards (plus pristine copies of his favorite retro games and consoles). While that's proof enough of Moon's success, Mahler eventually arrives and opens the case to show me perhaps the team's most touching trophy: a bundle of hand-written letters from young fans expressing their love of the Ori games.

Moon released Ori and the Blind Forest in 2015. The game's smooth-as-butter platforming, enjoyable (and deceptively) high-skill ceiling, exceptional Metrodivania level design, and gorgeous art direction earned it rave reviews; it currently sits at 88 on Metacritic. Its 2020 sequel, Will of the Wisps, earned even greater critical acclaim (and a Metacritic score of 90). In the face of this success, one would expect Moon to get right to work on a third entry.

Little did fans know, the Ori games, great as they are, served as whetstones to sharpen the team's skills to pursue an ambitious passion project Mahler and Korol had long dreamed of. Mahler began prototyping No Rest for the Wicked toward the end of 2015 before work on the Definitive Edition of Ori and the Blind Forest began. As a Nintendo fan, Thomas looked at how the company developed Super Mario Bros. in 1985 and then followed it up with The Legend of Zelda in 1986, becoming a legendary one-two punch for the NES. In his mind, Moon Studios had its Mario in the platforming-focused Ori series. What if it had its own Zelda?

"I was like s**t, wouldn't that be really cool?," says Mahler. "[We] do the same thing, that we start with the platformer with Ori. And then we actually do a top-down RPG or something. So that's what the prototype was. It was just basically a little miniature RPG, but then it became pretty clear, like, hey, we can turn this into a full-blown action RPG."

Mahler grew up a fan of action RPGs; he routinely cites Diablo I and II as major inspirations and reference points during our discussions. As he played those titles, he dreamed of versions that implemented features such as town-building and a more communal, shared world. "And then 10 years passed, and it hadn't happened," he says. He viewed Diablo III as a more arcadey, more limited sequel and realized that if Blizzard was taking the genre down that path, maybe he could go another way. Then Dark Souls arrived in 2011, popularizing the subgenre of brutal, deliberate combat that enamored Mahler and Korol. A top-down ARPG that incorporated this combat philosophy became an appealing prospect.

However, fans loved Ori and the Blind Forest, creating demand for a follow-up. It had won accolades, which, in turn, made Moon a more attractive studio as it began seeking a publisher for its ARPG idea. Moon began pitching No Rest for the Wicked (NRftW) to several publishers (including Microsoft, which published the Ori games) at the 2016 D.I.C.E. Awards, where Ori and the Blind Forest won three awards.

"We wanted to just see if there's [an] appetite for that kind of game from a publishing side because we needed a lot of funding to make something like this happen," says Korol. "We won three awards at D.I.C.E., and I think that helped [us say] 'Hey, yeah, we have this other game, and we just won three awards.'"

Although Moon would eventually sign on with Private Division, Korol says it wasn't the right time to commit to making the game at that point. For one, Moon had committed to developing an Ori follow-up and didn't want to divide its attention. In Mahler's words, Moon wanted Ori and the Will of the Wisps to be for The Blind Forest what Super Mario Bros. 3 was to Super Mario Bros – a stellar refinement of a winning formula.

And so, Moon was careful to wait for the right time to tackle its ARPG. The studio wouldn't have been able to achieve its goals at the size it was when it shipped the first Ori. It also just didn't have the experience. Working on the Ori sequel helped the studio mature as designers, as it could sharpen its skills by perfecting an existing template while learning the skills needed to execute on No Rest for the Wicked.

"You try to stay sober and grounded," says Korol. "Because we're in it for a very long haul. So, we're not in it to just get a bunch of money, try something, and fail spectacularly. We try to really build up to our ability to actually do this the right way."

Mahler reveals Ori and the Will of the Wisps was a testing ground for smaller-scale versions of ideas envisioned for NRftW. For example, the game's evolving town of Wellspring Glades was implemented because Mahler always wanted to try it in an ARPG. Ori 2's large-scale boss battles were also a forerunner to the encounters envisioned for NRftW. It's fun to realize the groundwork was laid in plain sight.

SHIPWRECKED

No Rest for the Wicked unfolds in a dark fantasy work in the year 841. The game begins with the death of King Harol, and it couldn't have happened at a worse time. A devastating plague known as the Pestilence has returned after a thousand years, sweeping the land and corrupting everyone it touches, transforming them into dangerous monsters. King Harol's son, a cocky and ambitious young man named Magnus, assumes the crown.

With the fate of the kingdom now in his hands, Magnus commands the church's inquisition, led by a similarly ambitious and cunning woman named Madrigal Seline. This dynamic kicks off a brutal campaign to quell the blight, and the unassuming island of Isola Sacra becomes a central target. The church's arrival ignites conflicts between the local rulers, rebel factions, and one particular hero caught at the center: you.

Moon is investing much into the narrative, billed as a grounded, gritty fantasy epic featuring layered, morally gray characters that could feel right at home in an HBO series.

"For the Ori Games, we already kind of like dabbled a lot with how do we write characters at Moon," says Mahler. "And how do we make people emotionally attached to these characters? And now we kind of have delved into this whole, almost Shakespearean tale where you never know who is going to betray who and who is going to live and who won't, and so on."

Players control a customizable hero known as a Cerim, a member of a sect of holy warriors possessing the power to defeat the Pestilence. Following a cinematic prologue, my character is washed ashore on a beach on Isola Sacra. She's half-naked, drenched by the sea and an ensuing rainstorm, and unarmed. Crates and other cargo litter the beach, as do giant enemy crabs scuttling about.

I'm immediately in love with the game's painterly art direction. NRftW's presentation resembles a 3D oil painting, and beautiful lighting effects highlight great artistic touches, such as brushstroke-like textures and rainwater trickling down surfaces. The Ori games look fantastic, but NRftW gives them a run for their money.

Another cool and unique presentation touch is the camera angle. Instead of doing a traditional top-down or classic isometric view as seen in Diablo and similar titles, NRftW features a curved camera view inspired by Animal Crossing (which is not the series' only influence on this game). Those familiar with Nintendo's happy home-building franchise may note how the horizon is curved to give the appearance of walking on a globe while revealing things in the background. Moon took this perspective and flattened it a bit, giving players a unique isometric view that lets them see background locations and elements beyond where they're currently situated. It's a neat approach that Mahler and Korol call the game's "secret sauce."

"We wanted that more immersive [view], like what you get with third-person. You're really in that world; you're up close to your character; you're seeing everything's massive," says Korol. "When you're top-down, generally, things are a little bit more [like] 'ant mode.' You're very disconnected, and everything's tiny. So we were trying to do this dynamic thing where the camera zooms out when it needs to, you can see the distance, you get up close and personal when you need to."

As I explore the beach, I shatter crates for loot, such as cooking ingredients and crafting materials. These will be useful later, but my first priority is finding a weapon. At this point, I can only attack the nearby crabs using my fists and a powerful thrust kick. Thankfully, I find a chest nearby, and inside awaits a mace, giving me my first real opportunity to sample combat.

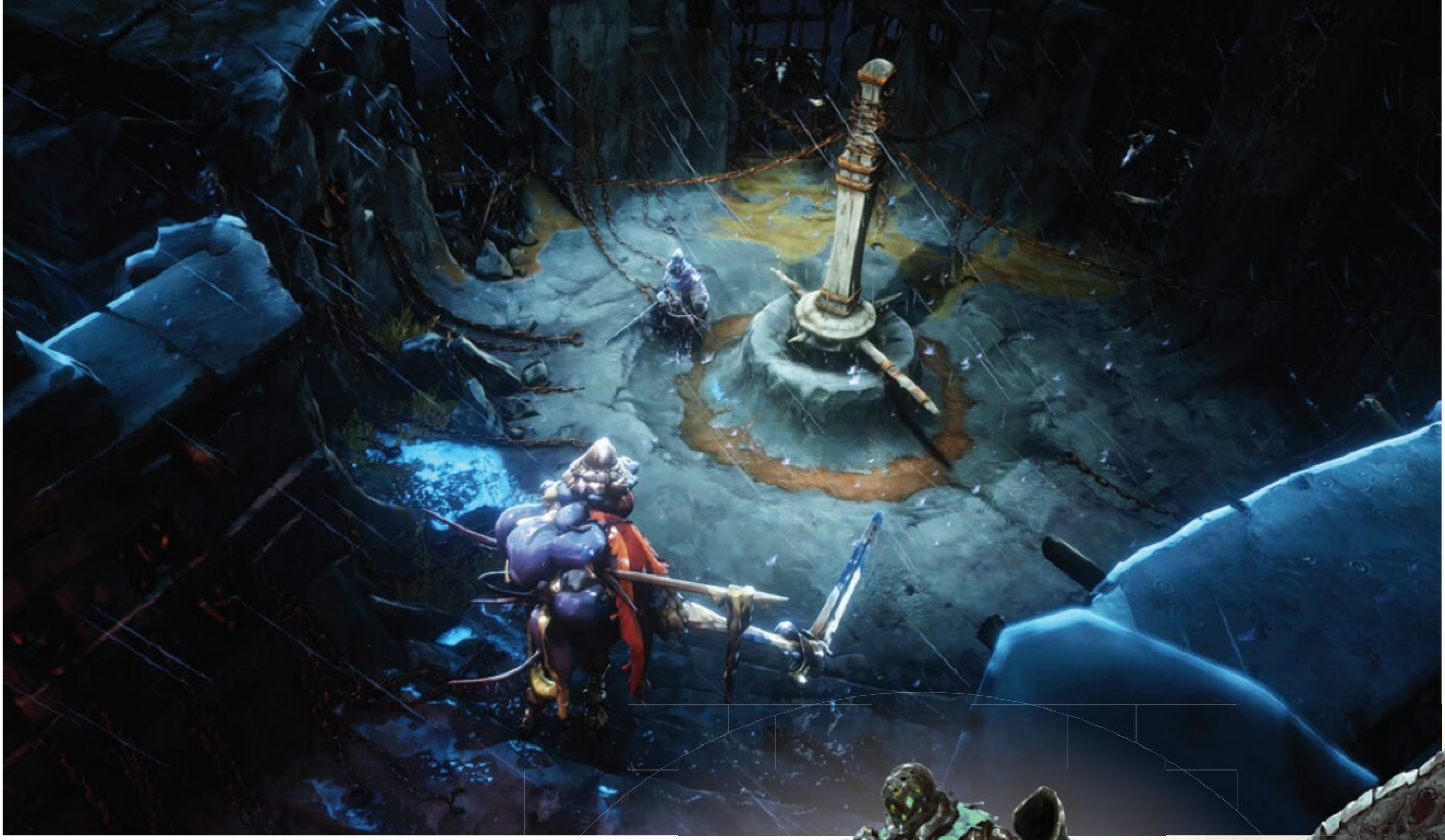
Why Moon Stays Small & Remote

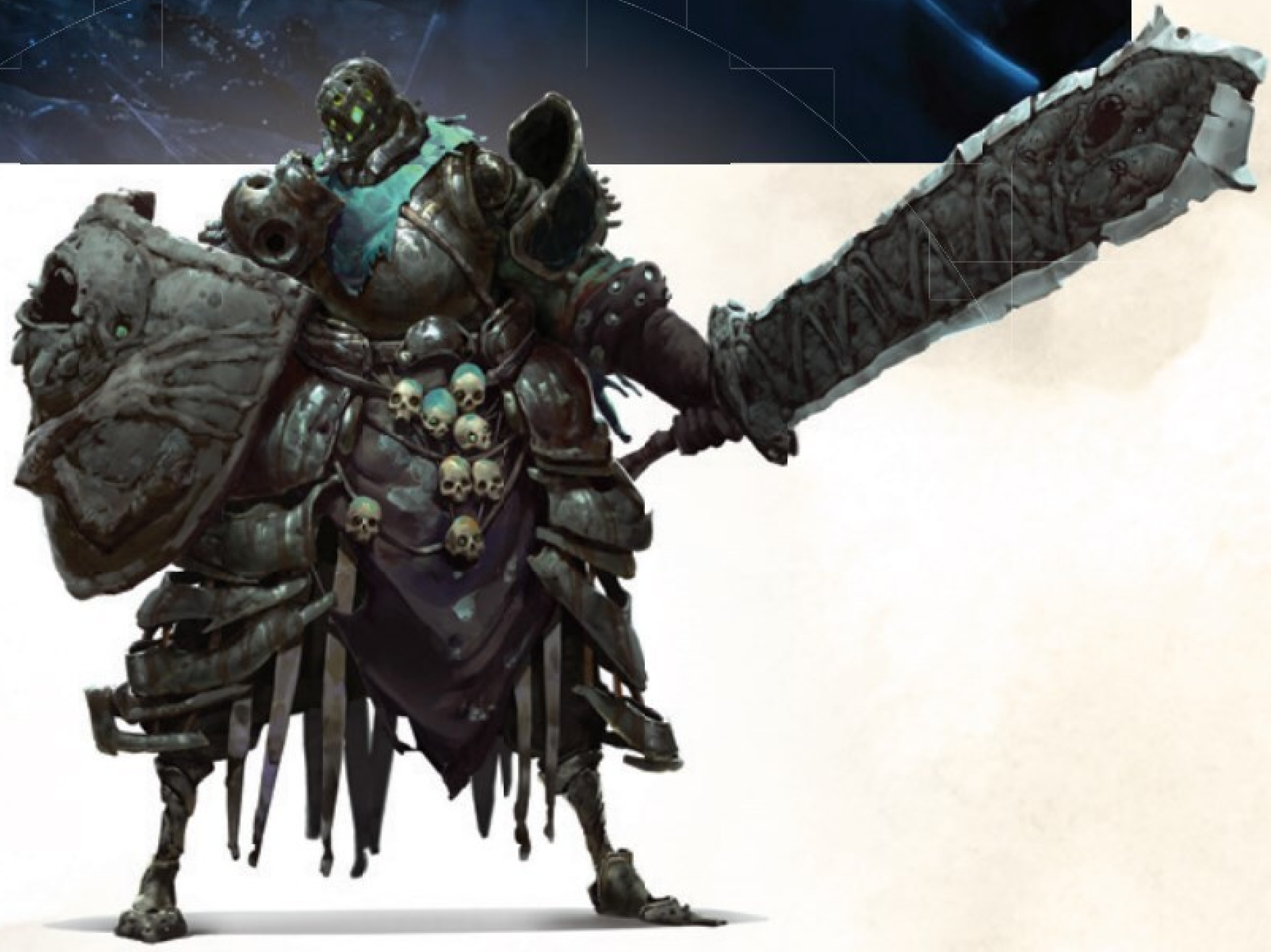
Moon Studios has operated as a remote studio since its start. What began as a team of 20 employees working on the first Ori game has gradually grown to its current tally of around 90, all hailing from around the world.

The team is far ahead of the curve in that sense, especially in a post-pandemic games industry where several studios have become remote-only or have hybrid home/work setups. Mahler and Korol believe keeping its team to a manageable size is key to its success; the pair never wants to exceed 100 employees, despite outside agencies regularly suggesting the team scale up and work on multiple projects simultaneously.

But Korol, a passionate advocate of remote work, doesn't believe in growing for the sake of growth. He ardently believes Moon's current structure maintains a healthy development efficiency that avoids redundancies, ensures quality, and engenders a more familial culture among passionate employees. The studio also organizes yearly retreats for the team to socialize in person. 2021 reports of an oppressive studio culture from former/current employees, which the founders have both rebuked and apologized for, suggest otherwise, so we can only hope the culture is as rosy as Korol paints it.

"That's the key thing," says Mahler. "I always liked what id Software did back then with John Carmack when they did Quake, and Quake was the biggest thing. They were still a super small studio compared to other studios. They wanted to have small teams where everybody really matters. And so, I think that was really important for us."





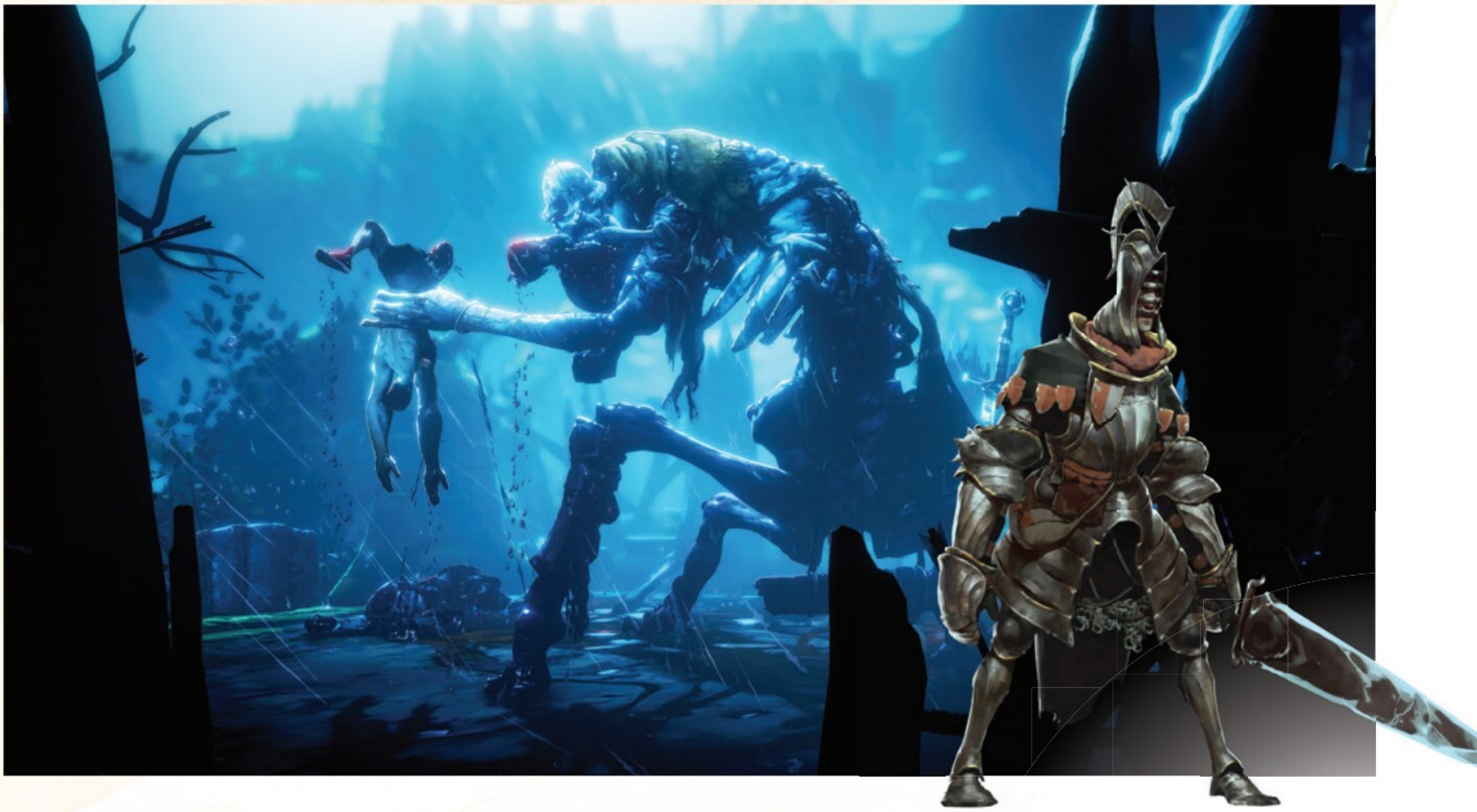
Weapons fundamentally change your playstyle. Instead of having traditional character classes, combat styles are determined by the weapons you wield. A mace, for example, grants heavy, deliberate swings. My evade maneuver now takes the form of a dodge-roll reminiscent of the Souls games. Conversely, daggers adopt a more fast-paced offensive style and a quick dash instead of a dodge-roll. Since you can equip two weapons at a time, you can swap between different fighting styles on the fly.

Moon implemented this system because it didn't want players to feel locked into a class with pre-set abilities. If you desire, you can mold your character into something resembling a traditional, say, Barbarian or Cleric; you just have to equip the right gear and appropriate upgrades. Weapons can also have perks, such as filling your Focus bar (which powers your special attack) with each strike or dealing elemental damage, such as fire.

Moon also wants to encourage players to try new playstyles, as finding a different weapon that's better than what you're using effectively incentivizes you to mix up your entire approach. Further ensuring this diversity is that NRftW's loot is randomized. If I replay the opening section, that first chest holds a different starting weapon or piece of armor.

Despite the curved isometric perspective, combat more closely resembles a Souls-like than the more spam-centric action of Diablo or Path of Exile. I execute different attack combos, which change based on how you time the button presses. Holding the attack button unleashes a more powerful charge attack, and you can also execute limited-use special attacks by hitting a button combination not unlike a fighting game. Using such abilities while holding a sword, for example, unleashes a powerful thrust that sends me charging into targets. Combat feels exceptionally good, with the impact of my strikes packing a satisfying weight. You can also block or, better yet, parry attacks, though the latter had a tricky window I had trouble nailing that will hopefully be fine-tuned over time.

Combat encounters are also much more intimate. Don't expect to mow down hordes of baddies at once. During my session, I battled no more than three or four enemies at a time, but most bouts tended to involve one or two foes. Enemies sport unique patterns that must be studied, and they're challenging enough to end lackadaisical players swiftly. You also have to manage a stamina meter, but in a twist, you can sprint freely. This dramatically changes my usual strategies for Souls game, as this freedom of movement allows me to retreat to create distance or rush in to close the gap without having to factor in the stamina cost.



SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

As I explore, I eventually meet an injured man who points me toward my destination: Sacrament, the capital city of Isola Sacra. Exploring the world is noticeably vertical for the genre, again a product of the curved camera angle. Wooden forts dotting the beach's cliffs include watch towers to climb. I spot staircases and natural inclines into coves below. The dense yet open areas yield multiple paths, including shortcuts, and several hidden routes lead to secret areas and loot. Between this and the art direction, No Rest for the Wicked has an inviting world to poke around in.

ARPGs tend to feature procedural generation in their overworlds and dungeon design, an unwritten rule of the genre Mahler finds puzzling. NRftWs world is entirely hand-crafted. That means every enemy, treasure, and secret is purposely placed. That doesn't mean the environments don't change on repeat visits, however. Spaces are hand-crafted multiple times, and a system called Alive chooses which preset version of that area appears. One version of a courtyard may be full of beasts, but next time, a single boss occupies it instead. Enemies might not appear at all. Maybe bandits will have laid a trap for you. Perhaps the threats are more fire-based now.

When you're not fighting for survival, you can gather resources by harvesting elements of the environment. Discovering an axe allows you to chop trees for wood. A pickaxe lets you mine ore. A fishing pole lets you ... well, you know. Herbs can be plucked from certain bushes. Materials can be used to upgrade your weapons and armor, among other uses (more on this later), while you can use fish and other cooking ingredients to whip up stat buffing dishes at campfires. The world operates on a day/night cycle, and resources replenish once a day. The time of day may seemingly affect other elements of the game, but when I ask Mahler how, he gives me a cryptic, evasive answer.

As I battle my way to Sacrament, I come across floating orbs. These serve as checkpoints, replenishing your health while reviving slain enemies. When you die, you don't lose money or experience, but your equipment takes a durability hit. Weapons

and gear never break, though. They just lose effectiveness. It's a noticeably challenging battle as I sample different weapons, such as a short sword and a standard sword, but each death teaches a lesson about my targets and tactics. Managing my inventory becomes an ordeal as it alters your weight; carry too much, and you'll be fat-rolling even when using the nimbler dagger combat style.

My biggest takeaway so far: I'm having fun. Even after repeated deaths, I take the opportunity to go off the beaten path, for which I'm often rewarded with a cave tucked behind a waterfall or a hidden shortcut that expedites my travels. I even wander into a zone with one particularly tough foe who kills me in one shot, a clear indicator that I'm not ready for whatever lies past it. As I get a better grasp of the combat, I approach Sacrament, but not before I hear a blood-curdling roar signaling the game's first boss is nearby. Eager to tackle this first test of my skill, I head towards the sound.

I reach an arena where the source of the roar reveals itself: a grotesque and oversized former soldier named Warrick the Torn. This multi-limbed creature resembles a human/crab hybrid and brandishes a giant sword. If dodging his sweeping attacks wasn't tough enough, his erratic movements and leaping slam attacks make him a formidable test of everything I've learned to this point. This boss fight resembles the flow of Souls games, but, as Mahler and Korol point out, presenting it from this isometric view eliminates having to babysit the camera to keep him in view, as in traditional third-person games. This makes it easier to dodge his assaults, which can send him crashing through barracks along the perimeter, leaving him momentarily vulnerable. Though he defeats me on my first attempt, I pay him back on the second (impressing Moon's founders in the process).

After collecting Warrick's dropped loot, I make my way into Sacrament to get a preview of the game's most surprising pillar: town-building.

HAPPY HOME DESIGNER

Entering Sacrament treats me to a beautiful cinematic that details Seline's unexpected (and, perhaps, unwelcomed) arrival to this backwater settlement. I won't spoil what happens here, but the strong voice work, writing, and dark tone remind me of *Game of Thrones* in its maturity and political intrigue. I'm then let loose to explore Sacrament, a once-bustling city that has fallen into disrepair, presumably due to the hardships brought by the Pestilence. Thankfully for them, you can make it all right.

Townsfolk offer sidequests, which you can pick up from them personally or by visiting a town bulletin board with posted jobs. But to help the town on a foundational level, it all starts by visiting Danos, the town architect, who is eager to rebuild Sacrament to its former glory. Doing so requires bringing him materials to rebuild or improve existing shops, which rewards better stock.

Fillmore the smithy, for example, initially upgrades weapons and armor up to a certain level. Building him a better shop unlocks new and improved tiers of gear and upgrades. His establishment gets a visual facelift, too. The same is true of other shop owners (read the sidebar on p. 44 for a breakdown of each). Like Animal Crossing, construction projects take several real hours to complete, so keep that in mind if you need better products in a pinch.

"I want the town-building in the game to be as satisfying as just leveling your character and your character progression is," says Mahler. "Let's make sure the world feels really alive."

You can also purchase and furnish a home of your own. This feature is where Animal Crossing's influence rears its head the most. Players can purchase land to build houses with a surrounding plot of farmland. Homes can be decked out with various decor, light sources, and even fully functional furniture pieces. Cupboards can hold consumable items, while racks can house and display rare loot as a vanity piece.

Stoves are used for cooking. Perhaps the coolest item is a music box that plays tracks from the Ori games, among other tunes. In a nice touch, placing objects is freeform instead of being locked into a grid as in other similar titles. That means you can freely arrange things at whatever angle you see fit.

You can also craft and place refineries, essentially small factories, to produce materials and items. You'll craft your core items, such as furniture, at a general workbench. A spinning wheel transforms thread into cloth. Tanning racks refine hides into leather. Alchemy tables let you craft various potions and weapon oils. A sawmill turns chopped wood into planks for advanced crafting. Furnaces melt mined ore into ingots, which you can take to an anvil to hammer into weapons. Several of these refineries operate automatically, so you can load them with ingredients and pick up the resulting goods later.

Though it won't be available at early access launch, a plot of land surrounding your home can be used to farm crops, meaning you can not only generate your own food source but also sell the yield to vendors. But as fun as all of this is to do alone, it's even better when you have a friend or three at your side.

The Vendors of Sacrament

Sacrament is filled with business owners you'll be dealing with on a regular basis. These are the vendors present in the game at launch, but Moon plans to add more throughout the early access period.

FILLMORE THE BLACKSMITH *sells and upgrades weapons and armor*

WHITTACKER THE WOODCRAFTER *sells furniture for home decoration*

MIRABELLE & MERIWEATHER THE TAILORS *offer cloth and light armor*

GRINNICH THE MERCHANT *is the general shopkeep to purchase and trade items*

GORDON THE COOK *sells dishes and ingredients*

FINLEY THE RARE ITEM MERCHANT *only visits town on Saturdays to sell expensive, exclusive, and enchanted items you can't find elsewhere*

ELEANOR THE ENCHANTRESS *enchants gear with magical effects, such as elemental buffs, and sells runes that, when equipped with appropriate gear, add additional abilities*

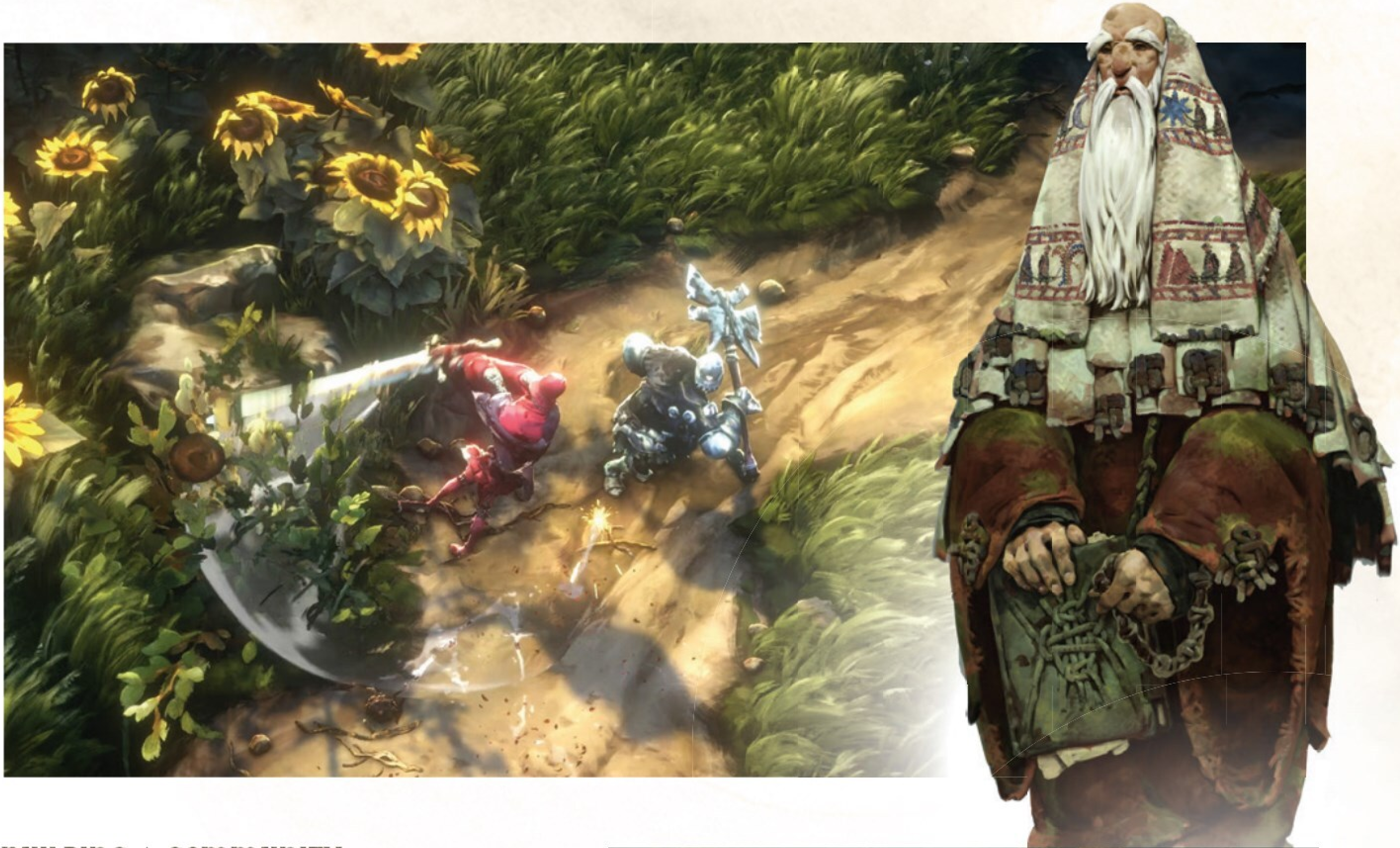
MARKOS THE ALCHEMIST *offers potions, bombs, and other projectiles*

MAKER DANOS THE BUILDER *improves town infrastructure. Improving his store, however, allows him to build shortcuts within Sacrament for easier navigation*

RANDOLPH, CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD *is technically not a vendor, but offers various bounties and challenges*

CAROLINE THE INNKEEPER *provides lodging with special beds granting beneficial status effects. You can also pick up rumors leading to quests*

Additionally, Moon confirmed two more vendors that will come in an update after the early access launch: Willem the Farmer and Boroth the Arena Master



BUILDING A COMMUNITY

No Rest for the Wicked supports co-op for up to four players, though it won't be available at launch. Upon starting the game, you can play solo offline or create an always-online multiplayer server. This server exists within the cloud, meaning even when the host player leaves, their friends can continue adventuring. Other players can keep battling enemies, gathering resources, and building up the town or whatever other tasks you have on their own schedules, and you can reap the rewards once you return. The entire story campaign can also be completed alongside a crew of allies.

Mahler views this approach as Dungeons & Dragons-like, allowing players to assume distinct roles, such as a smithy or hunter, that contribute to your shared world in their own specific way. Maybe someone built an impressive home you're seeing for the first time or improved Sacrament in some way. Moon envisions scenarios of exploring alone, then bumping into your friend who's out fishing or maybe fighting enemies. One cool example Mahler and Korol point out is that you can even spot friends battling bosses off in the distance in real-time, assuming you're relatively nearby. Think of this approach as MMO-like without the first "M." Moon is keeping this player count to four to maintain healthy enemy balancing (which can get tricky with more players) and because, realistically, the average player likely only has a few friends reliably available for regular multiplayer sessions.

EARLY ACCESS AND ENDGAME CONTENT

One big caveat should be noted about everything discussed thus far: it's all subject to change. That's because Moon plans to launch No Rest for the Wicked in PC early access, allowing players to experience it as a work-in-progress that evolves over time. Moon says it's not married to any system and is willing to rework something if the community doesn't enjoy it.

For a studio that strives for perfection, releasing an intentionally imperfect product for the world to pick apart is a drastic shift. But it also allows Moon to practice what it preaches regarding transparency.

In February 2021, Mahler famously criticized the game industry in an online forum for how certain studios misrepresent their titles by making them appear bigger or grander pre-release than how they eventually turn out. He called out titles such as Cyberpunk 2077. When I ask if his sentiments inspired the choice for early access, Korol says no and that Moon originally envisioned releasing NRftW as a traditional finished product. But midway through development, the project's ambition, the changing attitudes towards early access, as well as growing success stories, made the release model more attractive and sensible for ensuring a quality final product. And for something as idea-laden as NRftW is for Moon, having players help guide and refine its development is invaluable.

"Making a game, it's almost a little bit like cooking, right?" says Mahler. "Like, you don't know what is the exact right recipe. You have to make it, let people try it, adjust it."

Multiplayer will arrive in the game's first update. As the game evolves, new story chapters will be added alongside more areas of the world. The early access launch includes a substantial section of Isola Sacra, with players able to visit the following zones:

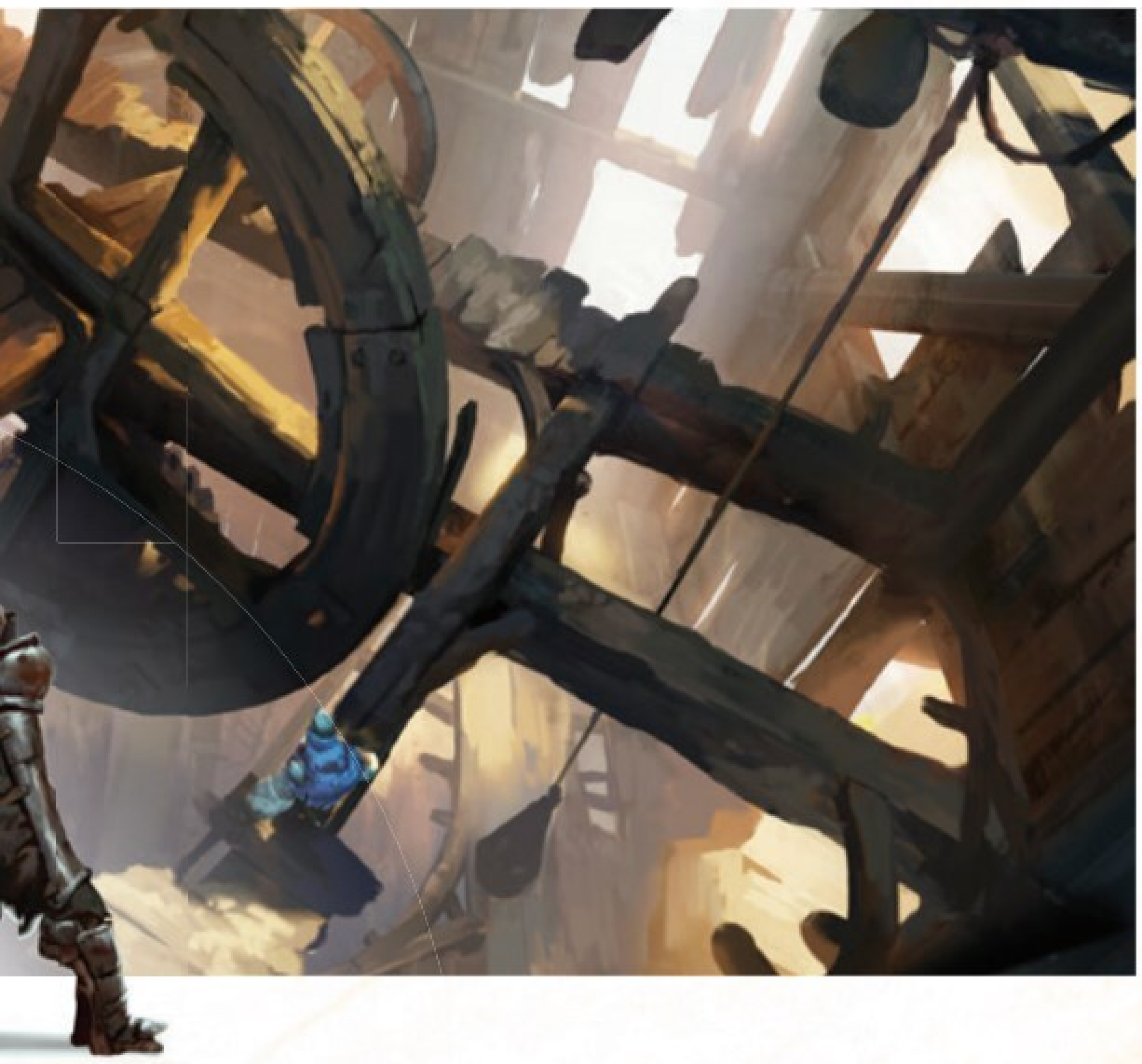
The Shallows, Orban Glades, Sacrament, Nameless Pass, and The Black Trench. The game's first story update will unlock three more areas: Marin Woods, Lowland Meadows, and Hunter's Vale. Expect to learn more about those zones in the future. Having seen the full map of Isola Sacra, the island looks huge and dense, and that's without including unseen elements like interiors, caves, and secrets.

As for how it plans to keep players coming back to NRftW on the road to its 1.0 launch, Moon divulged that its endgame content primarily takes the form of special roguelike dungeons called Crypts (working title). Accessible only after players have wrapped up the available campaign content in the early access build, entering Crypts involves visiting a special zone surrounded by several statues.

Approaching one of them and offering your blood activates that particular statue, which warps players into a randomized dungeon crawl, tasking them to get through 10 rooms to reach the end. Only one statue is available for the early access launch but more will be added over time, and each one will take players into different sets of rooms.

Mahler compares the Crypt's structure to that of Hades in that each room offers a specific, randomized challenge, which could focus on platforming, combat, or puzzle-solving. You never know what enemies will spawn each run, either. As for what awaits players at the end of the Crypts, Moon is keeping that surprise close to the vest.

Completing Crypts rewards special, exclusive loot and materials required to craft more advanced upgrades, creating incentives to tackle them repeatedly if you want to build the most powerful version of your character. Eventually, Moon intends to implement stipulations (such as, perhaps, exploring naked) and multipliers to Crypt statues in exchange for greater loot.



BEGINNING A JOURNEY

No Rest for the Wicked's early access period kicks off on April 18, which means players won't have long to wait before they get to push back against the Pestilence. Mahler and Korol have had to embrace being vulnerable during this phase of the game's life cycle as they will have to get used to seeing imperfections and potentially tweaking or outright stripping previously cool ideas based on player feedback. But in order for Moon Studios to build its dream action RPG, coming from two major fans of the genre, the journey is worth it, even if it means moving on from the series that put them on the map.

"We just want to say to everybody that played Ori and reached out and enjoyed it, thank you." says Korol. "It's kind of like a bittersweet feeling to be able to move off from Ori because, again, [we] worked in it for such a long time. But we just genuinely feel that this is the right next step for us. This is the next project, where we're all about it, and there's so much more to do in that space for us. So we are wrapping up this chapter with Ori, and we are very excited about what comes next." ■

Be sure to visit our exclusive coverage hub at GameInformer.com/NoRestForTheWicked for additional features and videos

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FROM

STELLAR BLADE wants to restore balance to its fictional world and an industry overloaded with endless mobile games

BY KYLE HILLIARD

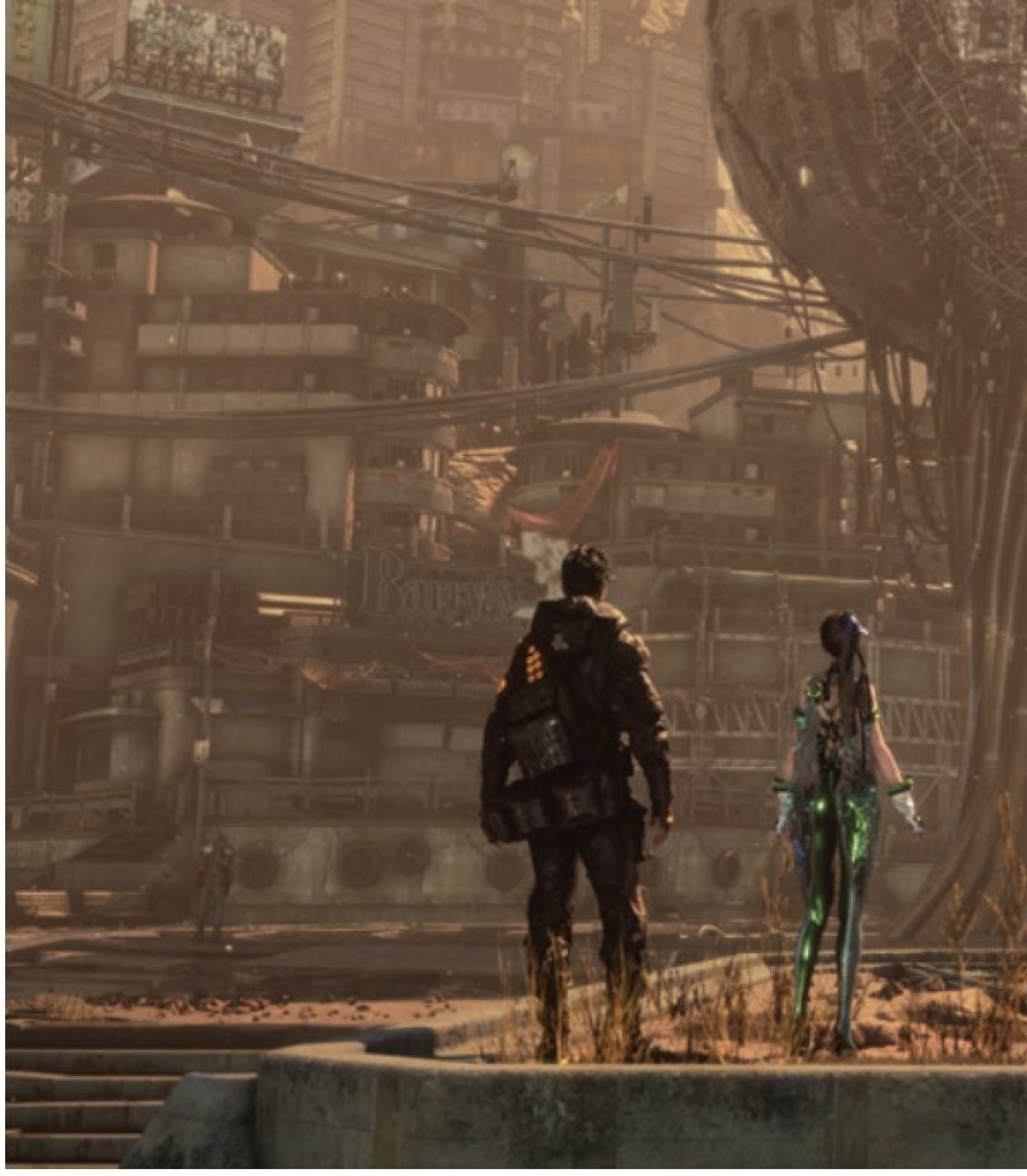
PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Shift Up Second EVE Studio **RELEASE** April 26

Stellar Blade's development was announced in 2019 by Korean developer Shift Up Second EVE Studio for current-gen consoles, boasting talent from the popular MMO Blade & Soul. It wasn't until 2021, however, that we got our first proper look at Stellar Blade during a PlayStation showcase, where it was shown with its former title, Project Eve.

For those not paying close attention to Korean video game news, it felt like it came out of nowhere. In the trailer, a beautiful woman is seen fighting a hybrid monster robot. She uses a sword to break off one of the cyborg creature's arms to use as a weapon before being thrown through a wall, revealing the fight was happening on a space station all along. As she careens through space further and further away from the station, it is revealed that a much larger, much creepier creature with too many eyes has grafted itself onto the facility from the outside. It's an attention-grabbing first look, and the trailer only gets more interesting from there as the woman (whose name is Eve) is seen pulling off more acrobatic combat moves on an Earth that has experienced some kind of apocalypse.

Considering Eve, her combat style, settings in both space and on a ravaged Earth, and a robot floating behind Eve offering help and advice, many were quick to compare the game to Nier: Automata. Speaking with Stellar Blade's game director, Hyung-Tae Kim, and its technical director Dong-Gi Lee, through a translator, that is not entirely by accident, even if the final game will likely showcase plenty of differences between the two.

"You're probably aware of this, but Yoko Taro's Nier: Automata was the biggest inspiration for Stellar Blade," Kim says. "That was even the starting point or motivation to make this game, so I'm very grateful for that." Both Kim and Lee are quick to detail other points of inspiration. The two specifically call out anime and manga like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Battle Angel Alita* but add, "While Nier: Automata did give motive to the progression of the story, the combat itself is different. Of course, they share a common factor of being an action game, but we tried to make the combat flashier yet tense."



A GAME WITH AN ENDING

After playing Nier: Automata, but before Kim, Lee, and the Shift Up team were diving into the minutiae of making Stellar Blade, development began in 2018 with a much simpler desire: to make a video game with an ending. During that time, development in Korea was focused predominantly on the mobile market, with few focused on console development, which led to some barriers. "It was pretty tough to get all the developers of console games into one team [...] mobile games – they have their own, I guess, pros, because you get to enjoy the world that you love whenever you want, it continues on, and it's maintained constantly, but then there is a market where only that kind of game exists," Kim says. "That balance needed to be broken."

COMBAT FOR EVERYONE

Stellar Blade's combat is flashy in all gameplay footage to date, with Eve pulling off pre-determined moves and throwing the titular Stellar Blade into the air while her long hair twirls around the action, but those impressive animations don't explain what players are doing moment-to-moment. Eve can learn various combos, but it's not the kind of action game where you are memorizing a series of useful inputs and trying to execute the right ones at the right moments. Every encounter begins with the decision of going in offensively or defensively. Enemies will not wait for Eve to make a move, and she can defend, parry, or use evasive maneuvers. Countering enemies will put them in a groggy state, which opens the window to use combos or "Beta Skills," as Kim and Lee refer to them. "There is also what's called the Balance Gauge, and if you succeed in consecutive parrying, you can deal a huge blow to the enemies," Kim says. "Other combat options include assassination, ranged attacks, and more, depending on the situation."

Boss battles carry a similar strategy. Kim refers to them as "the most important content in Stellar Blade" and adds that there will be a level of pattern recognition required to defeat them. Kim says combat is being designed in such a way that it will require proactive effort from the player, but it is not trying to make an overly challenging game like so many that are inspired by From Software titles like Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice. Difficult modes will exist for players who want them, but so will story modes. "Another mode exists for someone who wants to focus more on the narrative part of the game," Kim says, "But that doesn't necessarily mean that we got rid of the fun of the battle itself."

HEAVEN AND (DESTROYED) EARTH

In the world of Stellar Blade, Eve is an airborne squad member from space, but she is human. She has a secret that distinguishes her from her coworkers (that Kim and Lee were not ready to share), but otherwise, she is at the same level as the other members of her squad. "Humanity has been defeated by these enemies called Naytibas that appeared out of nowhere one day on Earth, and so humanity, they took this space elevator, and they escaped to an off-world colony," Kim says. That's where privileged humans live, but many have continued to survive on Earth and Eve and her peers have come back down to try and take the world back from the Naytibas. Of course, as is often the case in science fiction, not everything is as it seems. Eve is surprised to find humans living on Earth. Everyone had been told there were no survivors.

Many of the humans Eve meets on Earth call her an angel, considering where she came from, and welcome her assistance in the form of sidequests. "You can see it as an angel that descended from outer space with a sword," Kim says. Defeating the Naytibas is the main mission, but many need help on

an immediate and smaller scale. Kim does not intend for these sidequests to break the format. When asked what sidequests from other games have influenced the ones in Stellar Blade, he replied, "Let's see... The side quests were not influenced by certain games specifically. I should say that they were influenced by all the games that I have played all this time."

For example, there is one series of consecutive sidequests where Eve is trying to help a broken woman in an old pub in Xion, a location where humans have found refuge after the apocalypse. The woman used to be a singer, but now she is struggling to even stay alive. The missions Eve completes will help her recover mentally and physically, though Kim teases an unexpected ending. "There are some choices that alter the results," Kim says when asked if the player will be making story decisions in these moments, "But honestly, I wouldn't say you have much freedom. But there certainly are important decisions to be made."

Costumes serve as one of the rewards for completing sidequests but don't expect wearing different outfits to change Eve's statistics. The goal is to make sure no singular clothing item is emphasized. They want players to choose the outfits based on personal preference rather than statistical significance. Approximately 30 costumes will be discoverable throughout the course of the game, whether by just stumbling across them, receiving them as rewards, or creating them through found recipes. The team also plans to add more after release.

Kim used the terms "ingredients" and "recipes" when describing creating certain costumes, but Stellar Blade won't have players crafting new weapons – The Stellar Blade is Eve's only weapon. It can be improved to swing faster or deliver more critical hits, but they want players to fully focus on the titular sword.

TO THE FUTURE

Every new look at Stellar Blade showcases footage of a game that looks stunning in action. I also appreciate Kim's candid appreciation for Nier: Automata and its storytelling. It's rare developers are so straightforward about the games that inspired them, and it is refreshing to hear someone love a game so much that they wanted to make one like it. The feeling of combat remains Stellar Blade's primary question mark as I, unfortunately, did not get a chance to go hands-on, but I am already invested in finding out Eve's secret, what the Naytibas are, and what is happening on this version of Earth.

"When the world experiences an apocalypse, people develop these uncanny religious tendencies, and it will be interesting to see the changes in them," Kim says, wrapping up our discussion. A compelling seed planted for a science fiction narrative. ■

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INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

One more adventure

For as much of an influence Indiana Jones has had in cinema, the franchise's impact on video games is similarly immeasurable. Iconic series like Tomb Raider and Uncharted owe their existence to Lucasfilm's globe-trotting, treasure-hunting adventures, among numerous other games. But like the film series, aside from the excellent Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis, released in 1992, Indy's game portfolio has been spotty and infrequent. That's why we hope Indiana Jones and the Great Circle delivers an experience that cements the character as a gaming powerhouse in his own right rather than just an inspiration.

The Great Circle is helmed by Machine Games, the studio behind the modern Wolfenstein games, The New Order and The New Colossus. On one hand, it's a surprising fit; the team is primarily known for first-person shooter adventures. On the other, it's a match made in heaven; Wolfenstein and Indiana Jones both revel in beating the tar out of Nazis. Bethesda head Todd Howard, who first pitched the game in the late 2000s, serves as executive producer.

"I've wanted to make an Indiana Jones game forever," says Howard in a developer diary. "I had this idea for what it would be like and the story, what Indy would be going after, what period of his life it was in, what kind of arc he was going to have ... I can remember pitching Lucasfilm on the game and being a little bit nervous because look, it's Indiana Jones! And their response was overwhelmingly positive, and just that excitement has bled through the whole project, and they have just been so trusting and supportive of everything we want to do with the game."

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle takes place between the events of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Last Crusade*. A cinematic trailer begins by showing Indy in a situation only he could wind up in: buried up to his head in the desert sand, surrounded by angry Nazis. Their leader, a menacing bespectacled man, leans face to face with our hero to gloat. "While you were playing your pointless game, I was playing you," he snarls. "You're wondering if maybe you should have built yourself a life of meaning instead of ending up here, dead and forgotten in the sands of Africa." This villain noticeably sports a heavily taped nose; one has to imagine he ate a knuckle sandwich from Indy prior to this moment. Jones, flashing his signature smirk, responds by simply headbutting the man in defiance.

Although Indy's model looks great and sports the likeness of 1980s Harrison Ford, the actor does not reprise his role. Instead, famed voice actor Troy Baker fills his shoes and delivers a largely respectable performance, based on the footage shown thus far.

Indy's quest begins when a seemingly insignificant artifact is stolen from his university by a villainous organization. This ignites his curiosity and sets him off on a globe-trotting chase through destinations such as Egypt, the Himalayas, and even the Vatican to unravel a grander mystery. He's tracking an ancient MacGuffin called the Great Circle for yet-to-be-revealed reasons and will be joined by a sassy female companion (another Indy staple) in the form of an investigative journalist named Gina. She has more personal stakes for finding the Great Circle, and you can expect plenty of snarky banter between the two as they cooperate to fulfill their separate but mutually beneficial goals.

Machine Games is sticking to its playbook by designing The Great Circle as a first-person action-adventure romp. Players pummel enemies with their fists, shoot down foes with guns, and use Indy's signature whip to lash or even pull enemies toward them. The debut trailer also showed off set piece sequences, such as Indy getting behind the machine gun of a bomber plane to riddle rival vehicles with bullets in aerial combat before jumping from one plane's wing to another.

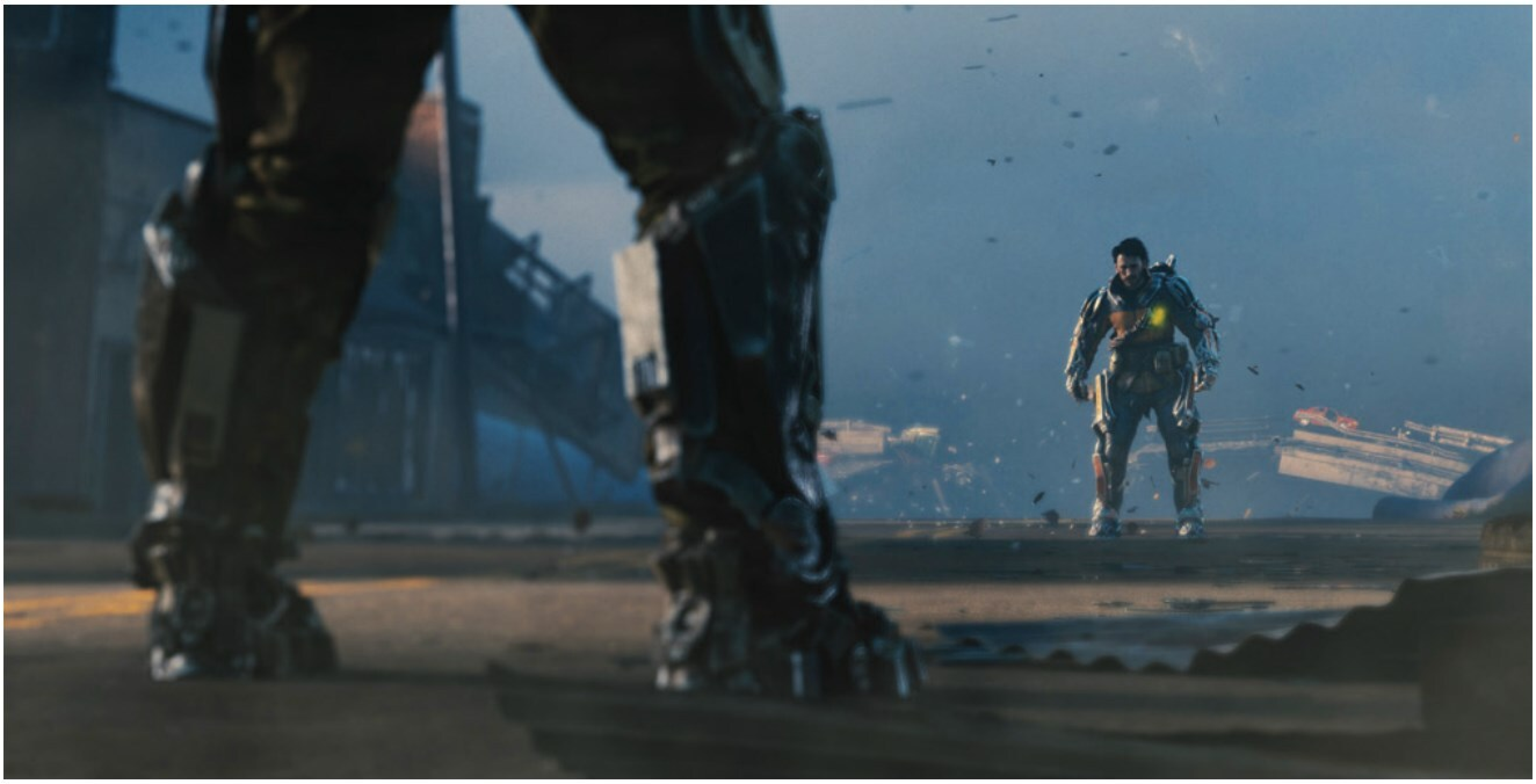
Platforming shifts the presentation to a third-person view, such as when Indy climbs walls or uses his whip to swing across gaps. The open-level design promotes choice by featuring plenty of routes and options for how to proceed. You can sneak past foes and use tools such as your whip to create noise to distract enemies. Or you can take a more bullish approach and go in guns blazing. Since Jones is a scholar and an archaeologist, first and foremost, The Great Circle also features plenty of ancient puzzle-solving. It's nice to see Machine Games highlight Jones' smarts and wits as often as his brawn.

So far, Machine Games has shown a promising understanding of what makes Indiana Jones such a fun character and franchise. The tone and humor feel true to the films, the presentation looks great, and the action and puzzle-solving look distinctly Indy. Like Jones' old friend Salla expressed in *The Dial of Destiny,* we can't wait to embark on one more adventure with Indiana sometime later this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Machine Games
RELEASE 2024

EXOBORNE

Weathering the storm



Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodhunt developer Sharkmob hopes its next title, Exoborne, will quite literally blow away players. This new entry in the increasingly crowded extraction shooter genre tasks teams of players with navigating an environmentally unstable United States to fetch loot, fend off rivals, and survive catastrophic weather phenomena.

Exoborne is a tactical multiplayer shared-world shooter set in an apocalyptic southwestern U.S. torn asunder by extreme forces of nature, such as massive tornadoes and lightning storms. These calamities were somehow caused by the failure of a mysterious government program called Project Rebirth. You play as a Reborn, a survivor outfitted in enhanced suits called Exo-Rigs. These mechanized suits sport special weapons and other tools that augment your abilities to survive the bevy of human and elemental threats.

Exoborne drops players into a shared open world where, either alone or in a party of allies, they scavenge for resources and extract them while fending off other players. The Exo-Rig bestows special abilities, such as leaping very high, and comes outfitted with a grappling hook and a parachute (think Just Cause), which players can use to engage in aerial combat or even ride maelstroms.

The gameplay combines PvE and PvP and features an evolving narrative and sidequests that unfold throughout the otherwise multiplayer framework. You also engage in dynamic public events and group missions between primary tasks. Powerful forces of nature add a chaotic wrinkle to fights; expect to engage in shootouts while getting swept up by tornados or dodging lightning strikes. These weather events occur at random, helping ensure no two play sessions unfold identically.

Characters, weapons, and Exo-Rigs can be customized with various mods and upgrades using the resources you extract. As a premium live-service game, Sharkmob plans to support Exoborne with various content updates throughout its lifecycle, such as new live events.

Exoborne is being developed in Unreal Engine 5 and is coming to PC and consoles at an undetermined date. Sharkmob hasn't shown much in terms of actual gameplay, so here's hoping the game looks as chaotically entertaining as its cinematic trailers tease. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC • Consoles TBA
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA)
PUBLISHER Level Infinite, Sharkmob
DEVELOPER Sharkmob
RELEASE TBA

ALONE IN THE DARK

Remaking the original survival horror

The 1992 Alone in the Dark served as a significant inspiration to the original Resident Evil. Resident Evil, in turn, received a sequel, which was successfully remade as a third-person shooter 20 years later. And now, in a circuitous way, Alone in the Dark is getting remade as a third-person shooter. It's a complicated ouroboros, but the good news is it gives us a chance to revisit one of the original survival horror games in a brand new light with the aid of Hollywood actors like David Harbour (*Stranger Things*) and Jodie Comer (*Killing Eve*).

Alone in the Dark is somewhat underappreciated. It established many of the mechanics that makes survival horror a compelling genre. It had a slower pace with less emphasis on action, let players explore what felt like a haunted mansion, and took camera control away to put the creators in charge of what the player sees and when they should be scared. The remake looks and plays more like a contemporary game with an over-the-shoulder perspective and familiar shooting sequences.

The story and characters are the elements that remain most consistent with the original. Emily Hartwood (Comer) enlists the help of private detective Edward Carnby (Harbour) to visit her wealthy uncle's home to figure out why he went missing and hopefully learn where he is. From there, the story and overall structure appear to differ quite drastically from the original.

I decide to play as Hartwood in my play session, but both characters are available. Her uncle's mansion is appropriately creepy and full of odd puzzles. There are also, as I learn after spending some time in the house, strange portals to other worlds in different time periods. Unlike the original game, the house is full of human characters. Many serve as Hartwood's uncle's caretakers, while others, like a child, feel strangely out of place.

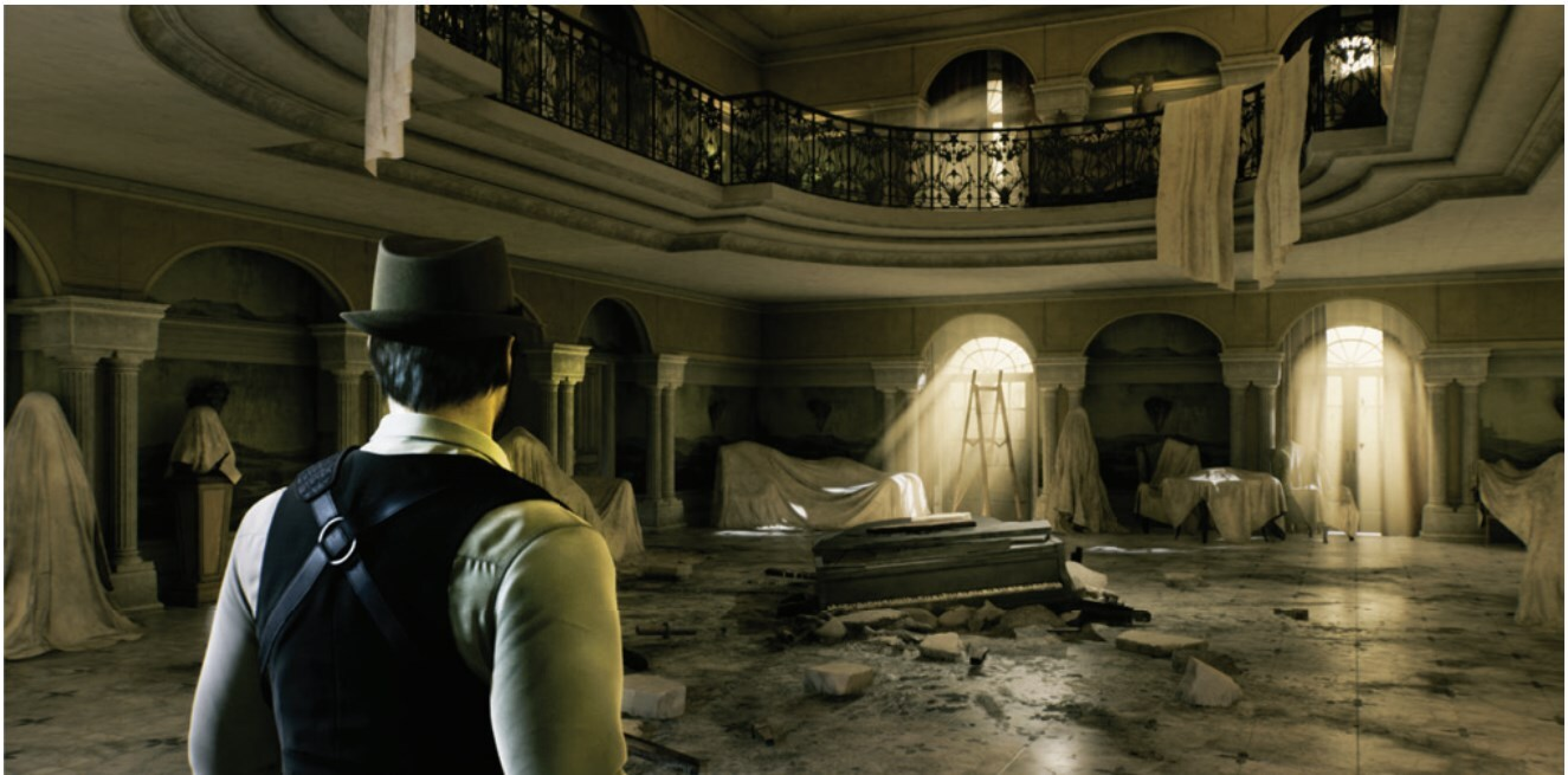
Playing as Hartwood, I suddenly find myself in what appears to be a New Orleans-inspired city filled with grotesque humanoid monsters made of vines. I'm able to dispatch them with my firearm and find safety in a shop where a character who knew my uncle finds himself in the same bizarre predicament – transported to another world. After fighting more monsters and solving a simple puzzle, Hartwood returns to the mansion in the middle of a conversation with one of her uncle's caretakers. She shakes the strange moment off and tries to enter the conversation as though nothing happened.

Moments like these, which Carnby also experiences, is where this new Alone in the Dark has the most potential. Watching Comer's Hartwood try to figure out if she is losing her mind or is truly experiencing bizarre phenomena in the face of characters who are none-the-wiser is exciting and scary. Another room I enter later inexplicably fills with black goo, which makes walking forward to collect a needed item difficult and intense before it all disappears in a flash.

The easiest point of comparison for Alone in the Dark, understandably, is Capcom's recent efforts with its Resident Evil remakes. Those games have bigger budgets, and the shooting feels better, but I came away from Alone in the Dark eager to see how it leans into the mystery and psychological terror of the situation. Resident Evil has always been good at scary action, but I am excited to experience something that unsettles me, and I am hopeful Alone in the Dark can pull it off. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

To see Alone in the Dark gameplay with commentary, check out Game Informer*'s YouTube channel*

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Survival Horror
PUBLISHER THQ Nordic
DEVELOPER Pieces Interactive
RELEASE March 20



SILENT HILL 2

Oh, it's you

Every remake of one of "the greatest video games of all time" has the unenviable task of living up to its source material. Recent examples include the Final Fantasy VII remakes and Resident Evil 4. However, few seem as fraught as the upcoming Silent Hill 2 remake, being developed by Bloober Team.

The problem is simply that it's being developed by Bloober Team. Save for a brief time where Final Fantasy VII Remake was being developed at Cyberconnect2 before the studio was pulled off the project, those remakes are developed in-house at Square Enix by a number of people who've worked on the FF series for decades. Same with Resident Evil 4, which came after a run of great Resident Evil remakes and mainline entries from Capcom. Those games are fantastic. In contrast, Konami, the publisher and one-time developer of the Silent Hill series, has trusted Silent Hill 2 with Bloober, which has, frankly, made several poorly received games, and notably, no Silent Hill games.

The main criticisms come down to Silent Hill 2's themes and how Bloober has poorly handled sensitive topics in the past. The original Silent Hill 2 tactfully handled topics such as suicide, various forms of abuse, self-harm, murder, and more – something most video games struggle with, especially ones released in 2001. Infamously, Bloober's 2021 game The Medium completely bungled similar topics. Why, then, should the studio be trusted with a game as sensitive as Silent Hill 2?

I don't have the answers and there's certainly some part of me that's not optimistic about the remake. However, I do think the most recent gameplay trailer shows the studio is going in the right direction – in some respects.

Though it didn't delve into the story at all, the latest trailer shows many of the game's most iconic scenes – stepping between the two apartment buildings, the orange juice puzzle, protagonist James Sunderland finding the corpse in the chair, and more – lovingly recreated. Crucially, the ever-present fog looks great, too.

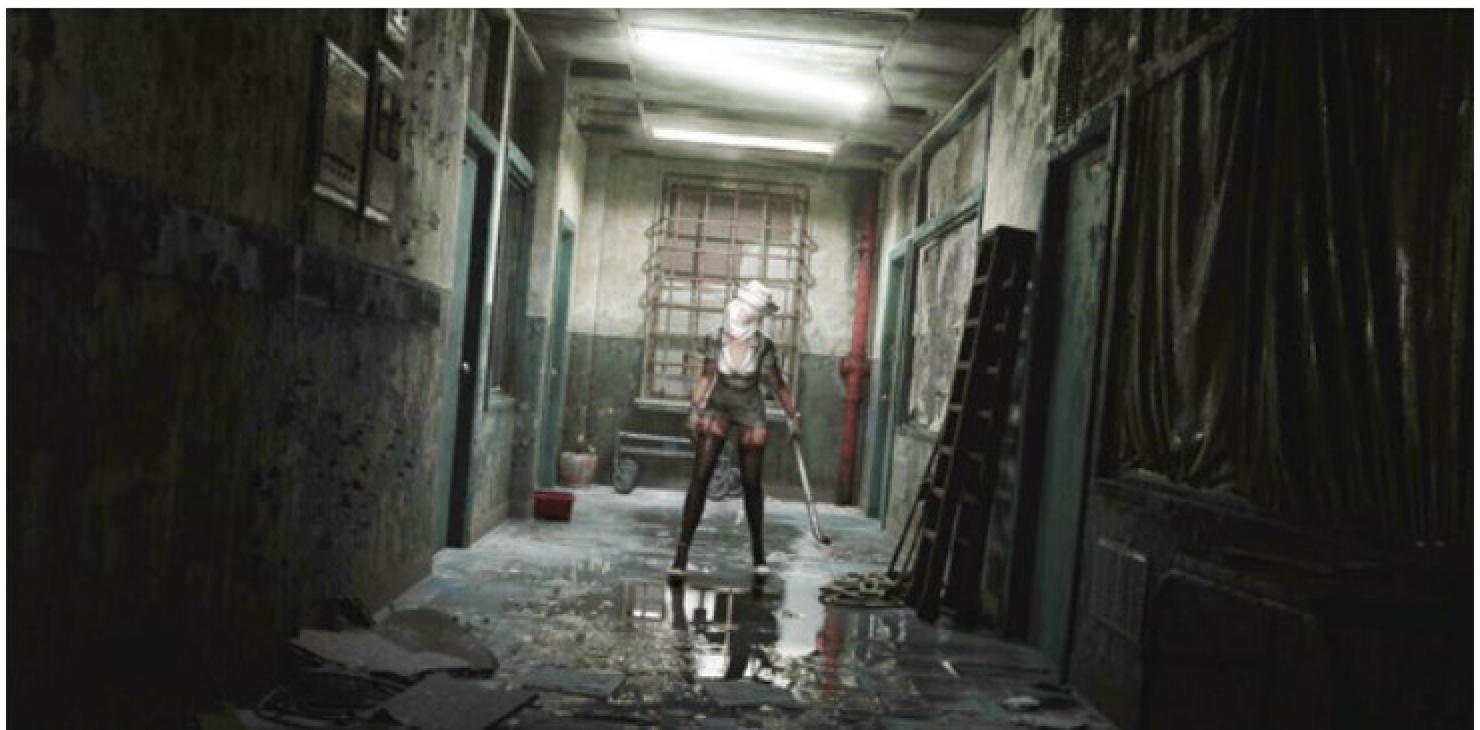
But the trailer didn't breed optimism for everyone. One of the biggest reveals in the trailer is the game's combat, which has been remade in the style of most modern third-person shooters and not the original's tank controls. For some, the new combat looks stiff and clunky. That is an interesting criticism, considering that's one of the best aspects of the original game. Controlling James was difficult because he's an average guy, not an action hero.

That the trailer is even called the "Combat Reveal" also rubs many the wrong way. When viewed through a cynical lens, it implies the game will be more action-heavy than the original. Sure, seeing gunfights against nurses isn't exactly what I want to see either, but if you go back to Silent Hill 2's original 2001 E3 trailer, lo and behold, you'll find it also had a huge emphasis on the game's action and combat.

I remain caught somewhere in the middle of hopeful for a new take on Silent Hill 2 and wary that Bloober will drop the ball with the story. For my money, the best thing the studio could do is modernize the gameplay and keep the original story intact – it seems like an easy way to have a great game on your hands. Nevertheless, until we know how that story plays out, I find the current criticisms to be in bad faith and easily disputable with minimal amounts of research. And without an easy, legal way to play the original game, right now, this remake is the best option anyone has.

I just hope Bloober Team doesn't make me look like a fool when the game is released. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Konami **DEVELOPER** Bloober Team **RELEASE** 2024



NIGHTINGALE

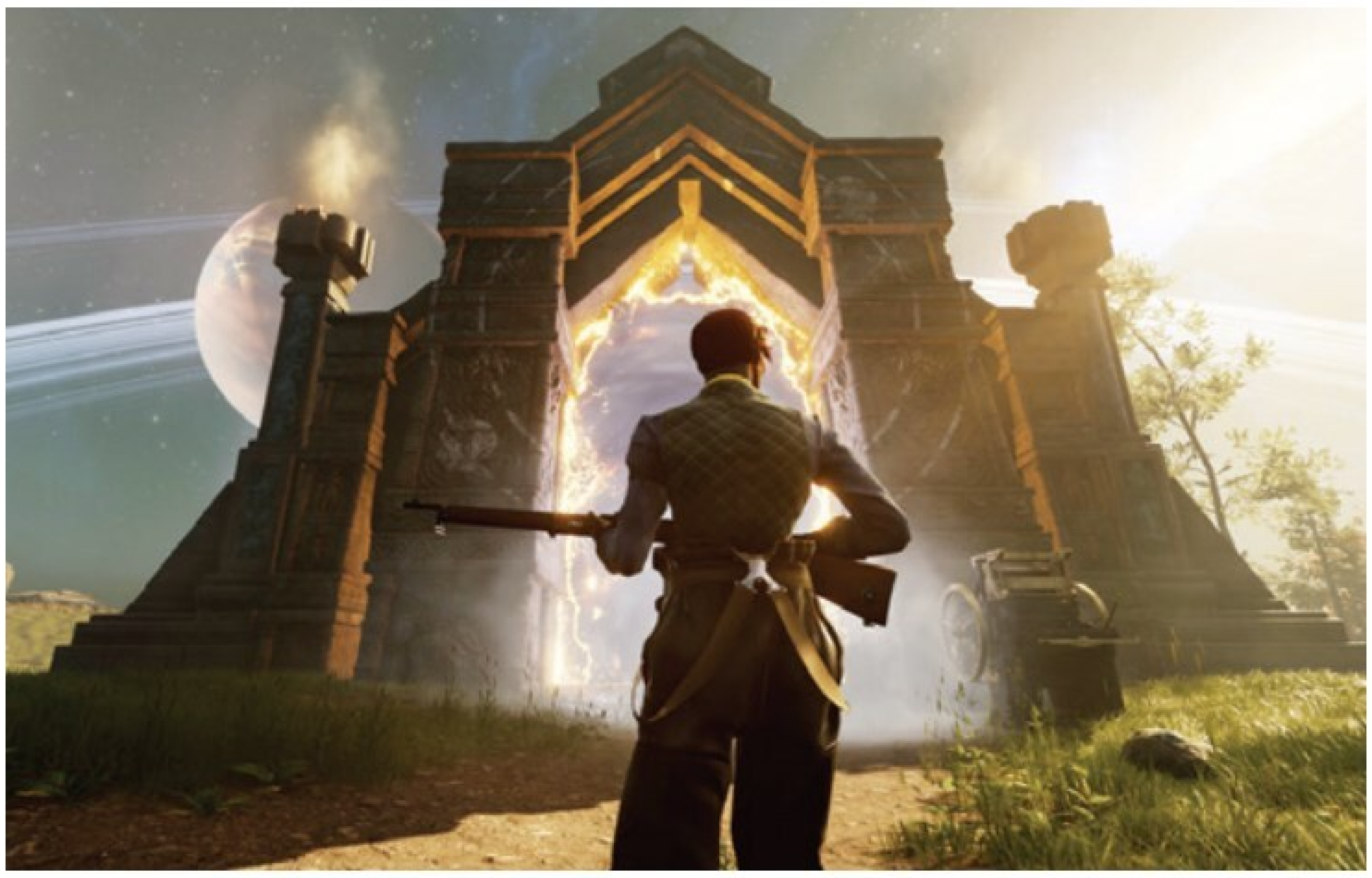
Helming the realms

Survival games are based on the idea of starting from nothing and creating something from scratch, but what intrigues me about Nightingale is how deep the worldbuilding is right out of the gate. It's set in an alternate timeline where the fairy and human worlds collide and have coexisted for years. After becoming stranded in the Fae Wilds, you have to fend for yourself and forge your way forward, but this isn't just some generic wilderness – it's a world of magic and monsters, and you'll need more than your crafting skills to survive.

The greatest example of one of these mystical modifiers is the Realm Card system. At portals set around the world, you can use the realm cards in your arsenal to create a portal to a new world with a specific set of adjustments. There are biome Realm Cards that set the environment, minor cards that alter variables like weather and player ability, and major cards that change the difficulty and theme of the realm, which adjusts NPCs or quests you might encounter. There are currently a handful of each card type in the game, but that number could grow over time.

"The great thing about system-led development is that once the system is built, you start to see the potential of what the system can do. And that just leads to new ideas and makes it richer as a result," art director Neil Thompson told me. As an example, the team expressed interest in creating new cards specifically based on player interest during the early access period.

Survival games can get repetitive quickly, and developer Inflexion is aware of this. While Nightingale isn't reinventing the wheel when it comes to the most basic mechanics like tools and crafting, they're adding new dimensions to the genre with their Realm cards and historical fantasy-flavored world-building. The game is available now in Early Access and I am interested to see how else Nightingale takes the survival genre down the rabbit hole with time and player feedback. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Inflexion Games
DEVELOPER Inflexion Games**RELEASE** February 20 (Early Access)

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/GD BA
GAME DESIGN
/GPM MS
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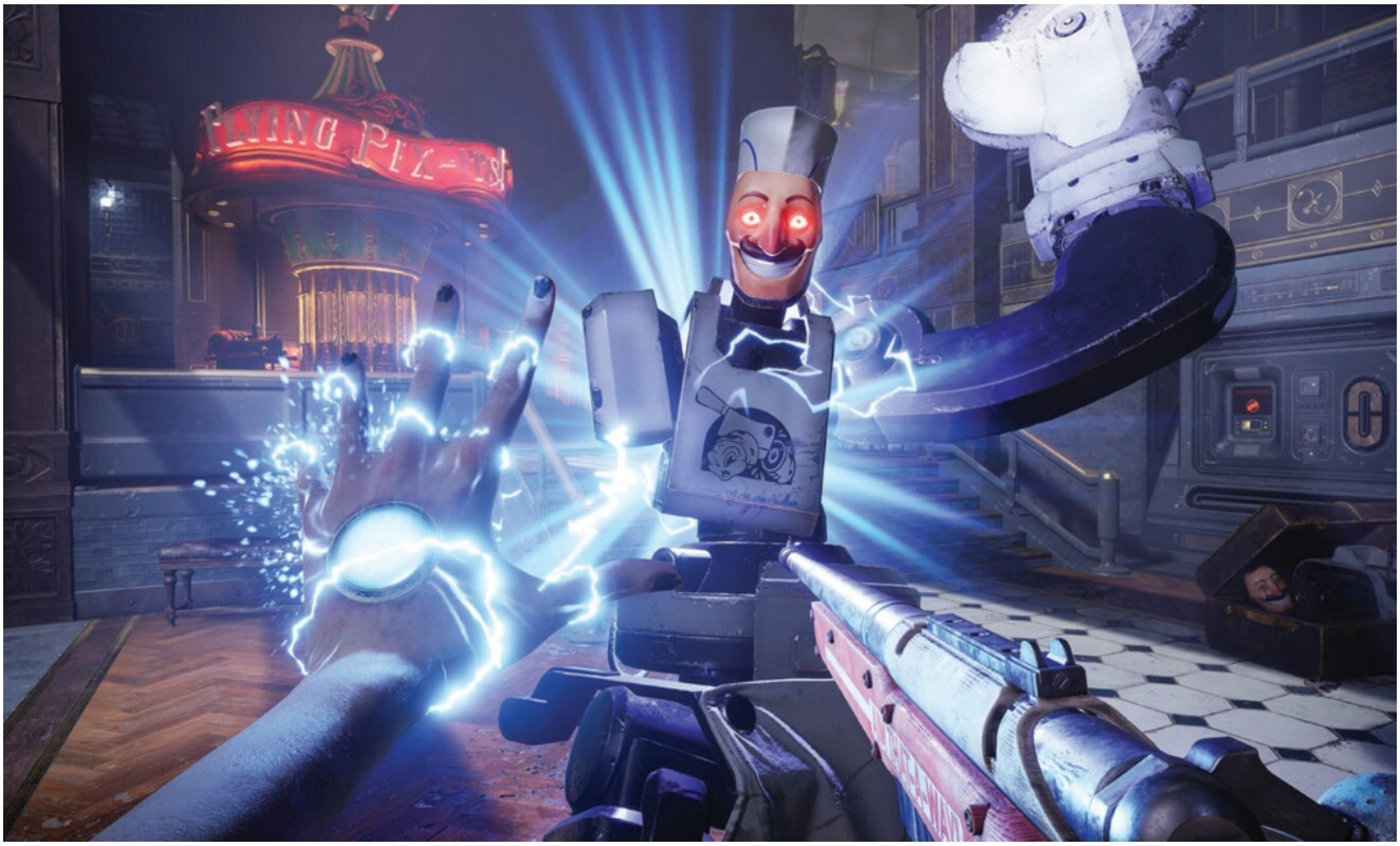
/GP BS
GAME PROGRAMMING

JUDAS

Fix what you broke, or don't



BioShock director Ken Levine formed his current studio, Ghost Story Games, in 2014 after closing Irrational Games and laying off the majority of its employees behind the aforementioned BioShock and 2013's BioShock Infinite. Closing Irrational was a huge shock a decade ago, especially as the industry wasn't as prone to widespread layoffs and studio closures as it unfortunately is today.

Levine took a small handful of developers and formed Ghost Story Games, working on a new approach to video game storytelling (now famously dubbed "narrative Legos"). After another look at its upcoming game, Judas, in the January PlayStation State of Play showcase, I'm still unsure whether the studio's 10-year dive into these Legos is what players will create their own stories with in the game. Still, one thing is clear: Levine loves the BioShock formula.

Fortunately, so do I, and I find it difficult not to be excited to one day play Judas, even if it does look like another spin on BioShock and, thanks to the sci-fi setting, 1999's System Shock 2, which Levine served as lead writer and designer on. Admittedly, the more Judas looks like BioShock, the harder it becomes to swallow the pill of Levine closing Irrational to create the much smaller Ghost Story Games to work on something different. At least this latest Judas trailer hints at the use of narrative Legos.

"Every word you say is being recorded, every thought you've ever had, your love, your fear, your hate, were just planted in your brain like weeds in a garden," the female protagonist, Judas, says in a voice-over while hacking into a computer. "What would you do to free yourself? We both know the answer to that question.

"Nothing: you are the frog in a pot boiling so slowly. You don't even know what's happening. But I'm here to set you free, whether you like it or not."

The trailer then cuts to a space station, the *Mayflower*, being blown up, and I imagine this is just one of many routes players will have to free whoever Judas is saying all this to. We later see a window blown open to let space suck everything inside out, a violent rampage through a shopping district of sorts, speeches gone wrong, and more. Much like BioShock and Infinite, Judas places players in the likable position of, "See this city? Make it hell for everyone here."

This new trailer highlights a few new snippets of gameplay that add to the BioShock of it all. There are not-plasmids that Judas can add to her left hand to throw elements like fire at enemies, 20th-century-looking guns to use in her right hand, and plenty of humans and robots to mince into meat and machine parts using both. And unsurprisingly, it looks like a delight.

ROTATE LEVER

Maybe in a different universe, with its own lighthouse, man, and city, Ghost Story Games reveals Judas as a game that uses narrative Legos to create an experience we've never seen before. But this is not that universe – if this game was called "BioShock: Judas," I wouldn't bat an eye.

More than a decade since the last BioShock, I'm not upset Levine is seemingly using that franchise's foundation to create another variant of it. Perhaps I need a Judas to free me from eating up every BioShock-like the industry serves me.

On a new PlayStation Blog post, Levine hinted at players' choices in Judas. "Characters have always been the driving force in every game we've ever made, [...] but what if you could choose between who to befriend and who to stab in the back?" He added that with Judas, Ghost Story Games wants to "craft an experience where these decisions and how the story unfolds is up to you. Because you, as Judas, are the driver of every event in a story with a new cast of characters to get to know – and change – in ways you haven't experienced before in our games."

A few years ago, this statement might have been bolder – a game where players decide every little thing, and the experience shifts to match that? That's an intriguing premise I'm not sure I would have fully believed. But it's a post-Baldur's Gate 3 world now. No game has given players more freedom to shift the world, its story, and its characters with choices than Baldur's Gate 3. To his credit, Levine admitted as much on a 2023 Game Maker's Notebook podcast episode, pointing to Larian Studios' RPG as the best example of a game that uses narrative Legos to scale player freedom.

Unfortunately, it could be a while until we find out how successfully Ghost Story Games crafts its new storytelling vision because the latest look at Judas revealed nothing in the way of a release window. And given Levine's track record, it wouldn't be surprising if this first-person adventure is still a long way off. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Take-Two Interactive
DEVELOPER Ghost Story Games **RELEASE** TBA

A NEW MOPIC BY RICK JOHNSON
"THE TEARS OF BABY G"
"5/7 VIRTUES" – BEAU MARSHALL

TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU

Dueling with death

Abubakar Salim, the founder of Surgent Studios, is a staunch believer in the storytelling power of video games. He mentioned it at a preview event, in a speech for The Game Awards, and in a one-on-one interview with me – he won't let us forget it. But the more I learn about his studio's debut game, Tales of Kenzera: Zau, the more I realize it isn't just set in a video game because he likes the medium. It's the only format that really makes sense for the narrative he's trying to tell.

"I truly do believe that metroidvanias are the perfect encapsulation of what the journey of grief is," Salim says. "You are thrown into a world you have no idea about. You cannot ever prepare for it, and at the beginning, it's terrifying. It's vast, it's frightening, but the longer you spend in it, the more you kind of journey around it, you realize that, essentially, it's given you the tools to cope with it, to manage with it."

After spending about an hour with a hands-on demo, this definitely describes Zau, the protagonist of the game. After losing his father, he makes a bargain with the god of death Kalunga to bring him back to life. Kalunga accompanies Zau as he journeys through the world, complementing the boy's rashness with a grounded sense of wisdom. It's a dynamic I can see holding up well throughout the rest of the narrative, and I look forward to seeing how Zau grows over time.

Of course, the journey to resurrect his father is one fraught with peril, so Zau needs to use his Sun and Moon masks to fend off aggressive spirits. Gifted to him by his father, each mask allows him to use magic in a different way; the Moon gives him long-range attacks while the Sun makes him a melee menace. The best part is that you can switch between the two at the click of a button (Salim mentions the Devil May Cry series as a major influence), chaining attacks from the two movesets together in a vibrant, violent dance. Despite not having many abilities at the start of the game, the freedom to swap at will is invigorating, giving you creative ways to approach what might be otherwise simple encounters. I eagerly await the full experience of unlocking nodes on the skill tree and expanding my arsenal of attacks in the full version.

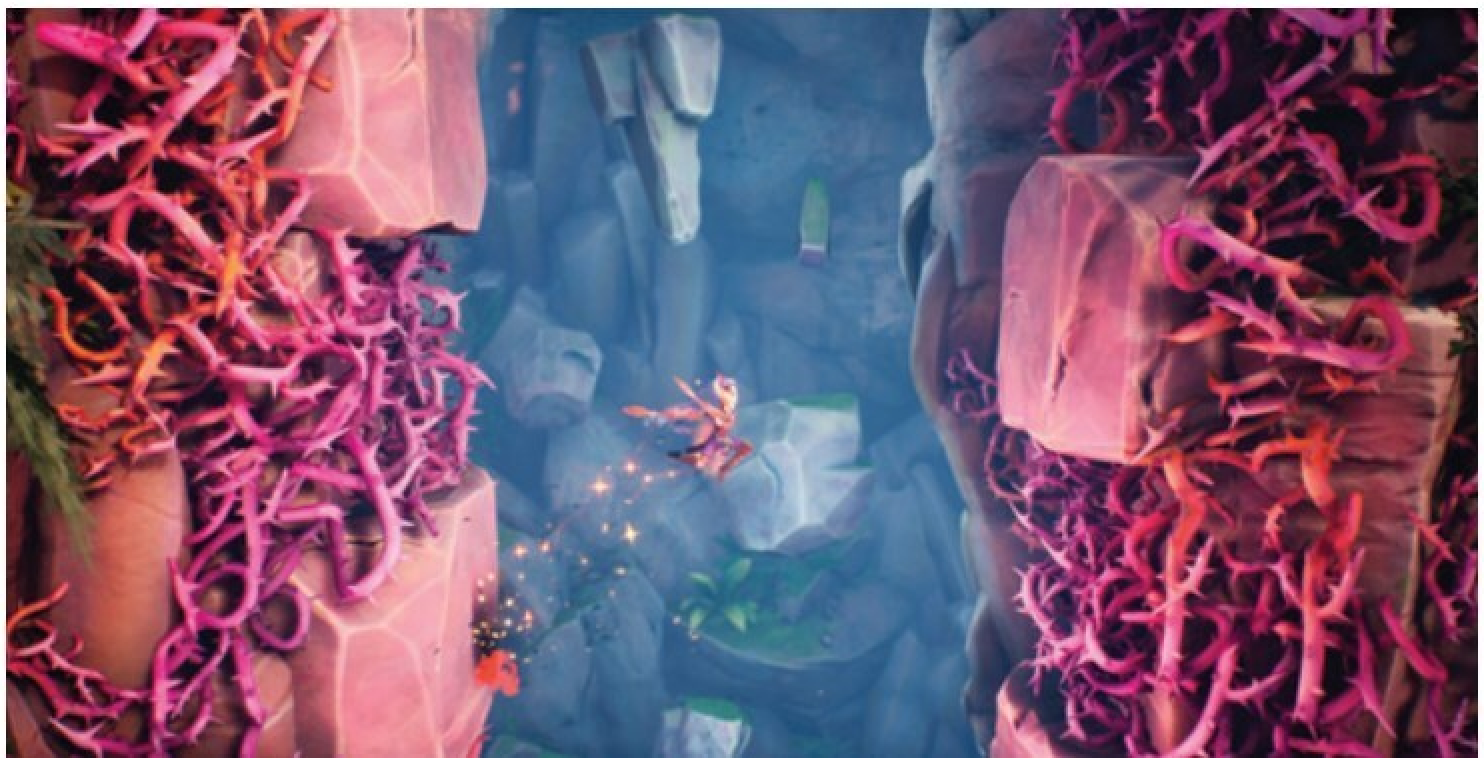
This combat system has narrative implications as well. "The masks, for me, almost represent this idea of hiding or putting on a brave face in order to conquer or move forward," Salim says. He also says that, in much of Bantu culture, the sun and the moon represent life and death, so they're a way for Zau to process his feelings. They're a useful tool for navigating the world, but they come with their own emotional challenges, as well.

The story of Zau is one Salim went through himself recently when he lost his father, and the narrative of the game is a way for him to process his feelings from that time in a way others might relate to. On that note, Zau is not the only protagonist in the game – his story is being read from a book obtained by a character named Zuberi. Living in Kenzera in the year 2089, Zuberi has also just lost his father, and he turns to legends of years past to process his emotions. Salim says this was done to represent how universal the grieving process is, but it also clearly mirrors how the player might interact with the game. Stories help us understand ourselves better. After all, it's why Salim wanted to make a game.

It's not every day that we get to see such specific emotional reasoning behind a game, and I've enjoyed hearing the lead developer speak about it, so it's especially encouraging that my time with the demo left me feeling more optimistic than before. Video games tell stories in ways no other medium can, and I'm excited to experience Zau's when the game launches this April.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Surgent Studios **DEVELOPER** Electronic Arts **RELEASE** April 23



DEATH STRANDING 2: ON THE BEACH

Return to sender

Despite Hideo Kojima's penchant for making expansive, multi-game stories (see the Metal Gear franchise), Death Stranding concluded in a surprisingly succinct way. Without spoiling its most interesting plot points (of which there are many), Norman Reedus' Sam Porter Bridges reconnected the world as he intended, and bad guys were defeated. During the leadup to its release, we had nothing but questions about what was happening in Death Stranding, but by the end, we mostly had all our answers. But that didn't mean we weren't eager to return to the bizarre world Kojima Productions had created. Thankfully, a sequel was confirmed in 2022, and we recently got another injection of Death Stranding 2 details thanks to a nearly 10-minute trailer, including its official name: Death Stranding 2: On the Beach. We were also presented with dozens of fascinating new questions.

Fragile is back and once again performed by Léa Seydoux, who sports a pair of living gloves around her neck to help cover her mouth and light her cigarettes. She is reintroduced alongside a new character whose likeness is modeled after film director George Miller. Miller is known primarily for creating and directing the *Mad Max* films. That's not the only new filmmaker likeness in the game. Sam Porter Bridges is now joined by a talking marionette puppet modeled after Fatih Akin, a Turkish-German director and writer. After giving Sam his new puppet friend, Fragile says, "These days I am Fragile in name only," before explaining her efforts to create Drawbridge, which apparently was started when Sam went off on his own after the events of the first game.

In the footage for the game, we also learn the villain Higgs (Troy Baker), who was teased in the first trailer, has returned. He wears a mask but removes it to reveal a face that looks like it belongs in *The Crow*. He accuses Sam of trading in rope for a stick this go 'round, recalling a major element of the original game, which discussed how early humanity was faced with two tools in the beginning – one to create connection and one to create conflict. Also, Higgs attacks enemies with a guitar. It probably goes without saying that just about everything we've seen so far is bizarre.

Other interesting elements of the trailer include discussions about the black goo from the universe of Death Stranding being a sort of primordial soup. Lou, the baby Sam carried with him throughout the first game, has either disappeared, been killed, or is now in control of a highly skilled samurai robot. We also got a peak at Elle Fanning's new character sneaking around and listening in on a discussion, but we know nothing else about her so far.

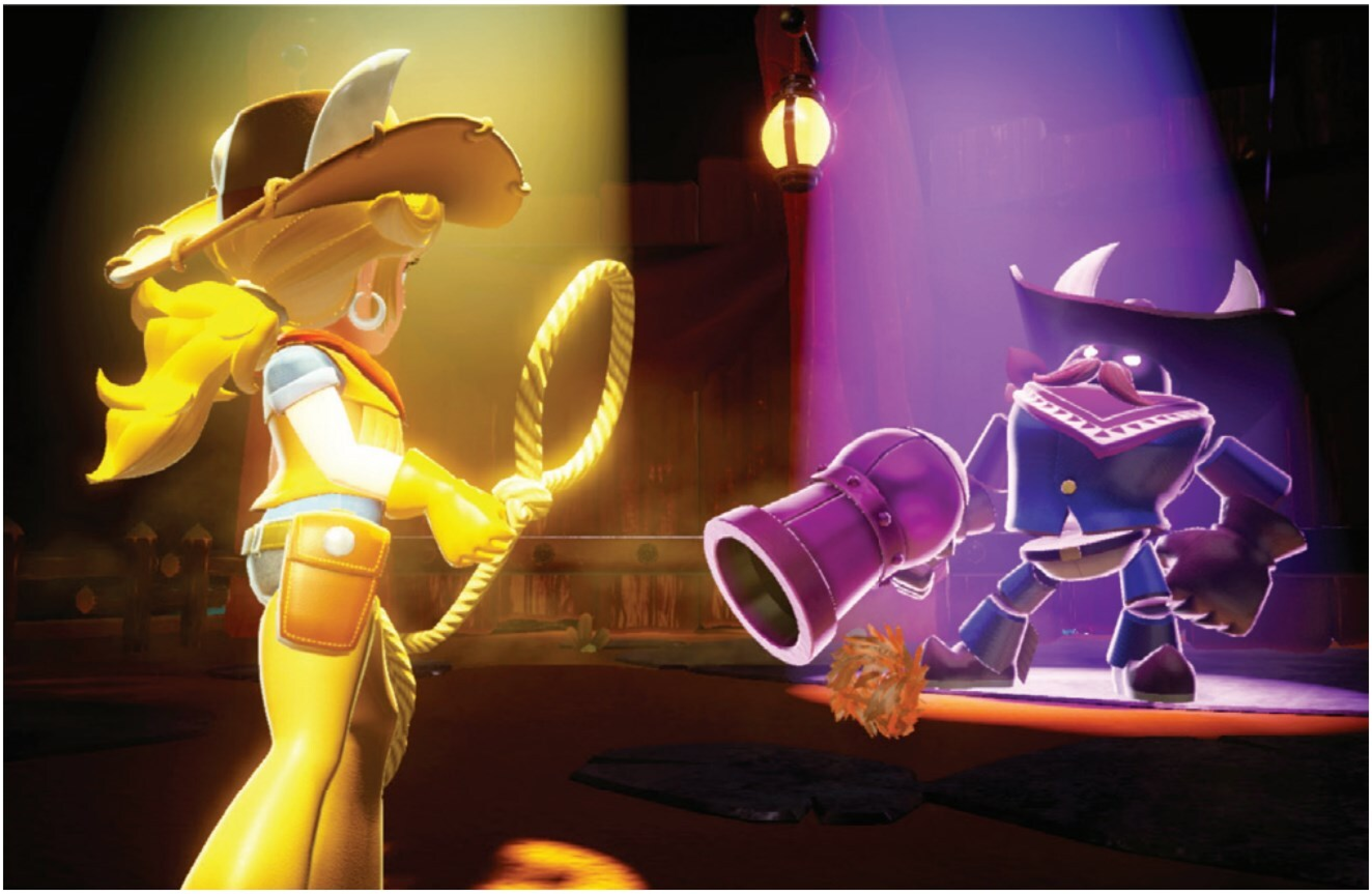
Curiously, knowing Hideo Kojima's love of film and fascination with nuclear weapons, the subtitle is likely a reference to the 1957 novel and its 1959 film adaption, *On the Beach*, which examined a world in the aftermath of nuclear devastation following a fictionalized World War III.

The trailer for the game ends with a final question – "Should we have connected?" and promises a 2025 release window. Unfortunately, it will still be some time before we learn the answer. Kojima Productions has decided to keep us waiting. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Kojima Productions
RELEASE 2025

PRINCESS PEACH: SHOWTIME

Landing the part

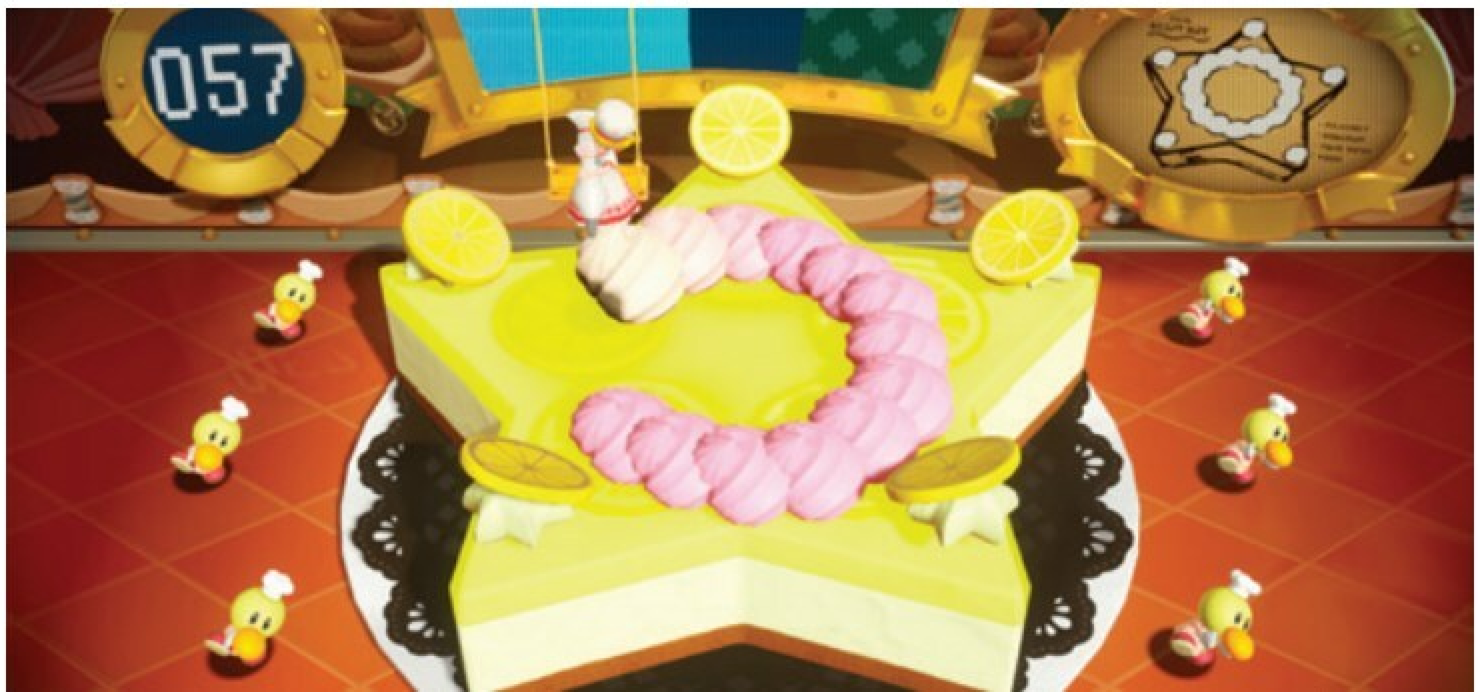


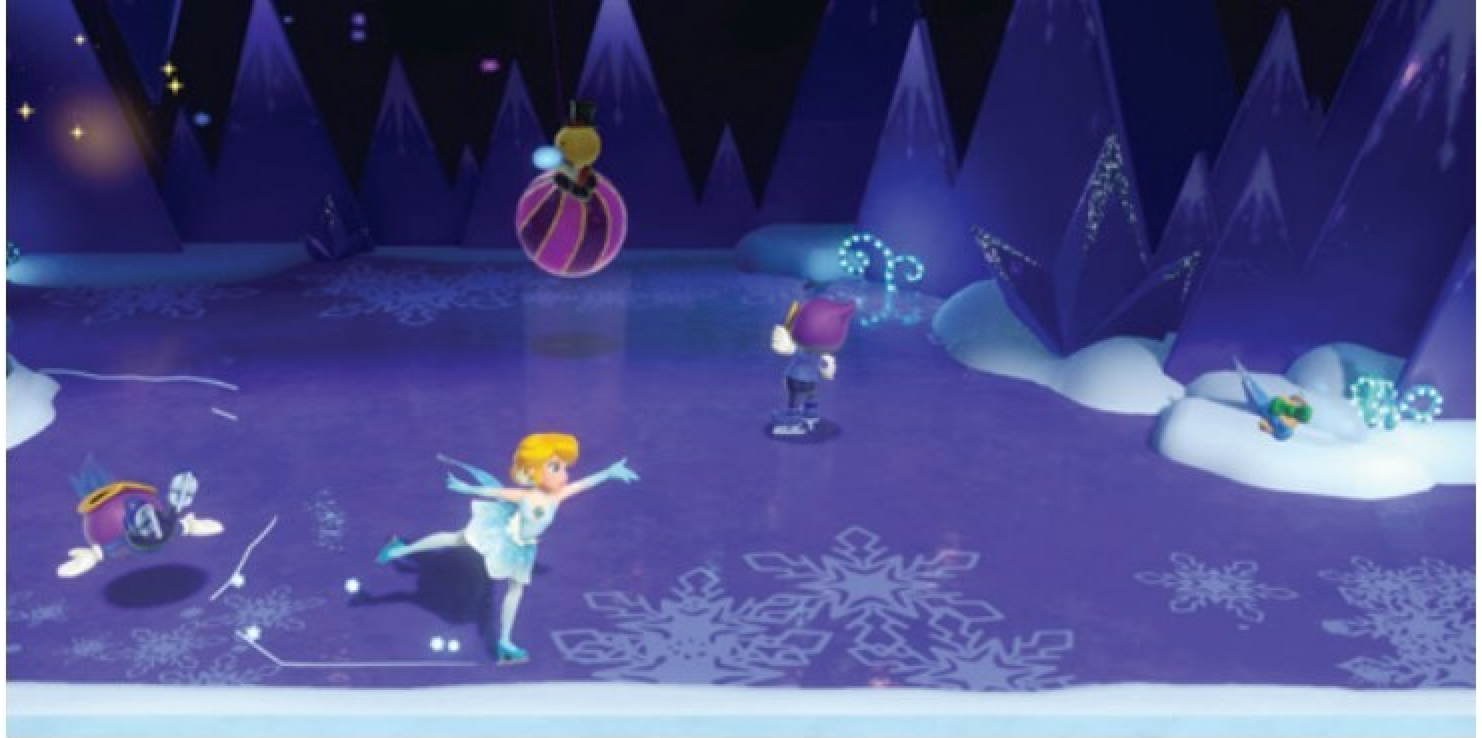
What starts as a lovely evening visit to the Mushroom Kingdom's Sparkle Theater turns into a hectic performance in Princess Peach: Showtime. Nintendo's leading lady must help reclaim the playhouse from Grape and The Sour Bunch, a group of villains hellbent on stealing the spotlight. Peach must visit the theater's many stages to assist the resident actors in getting the show back on track by transforming into special outfits to complete fun activities like cake decorating, ice skating, and sword fighting.

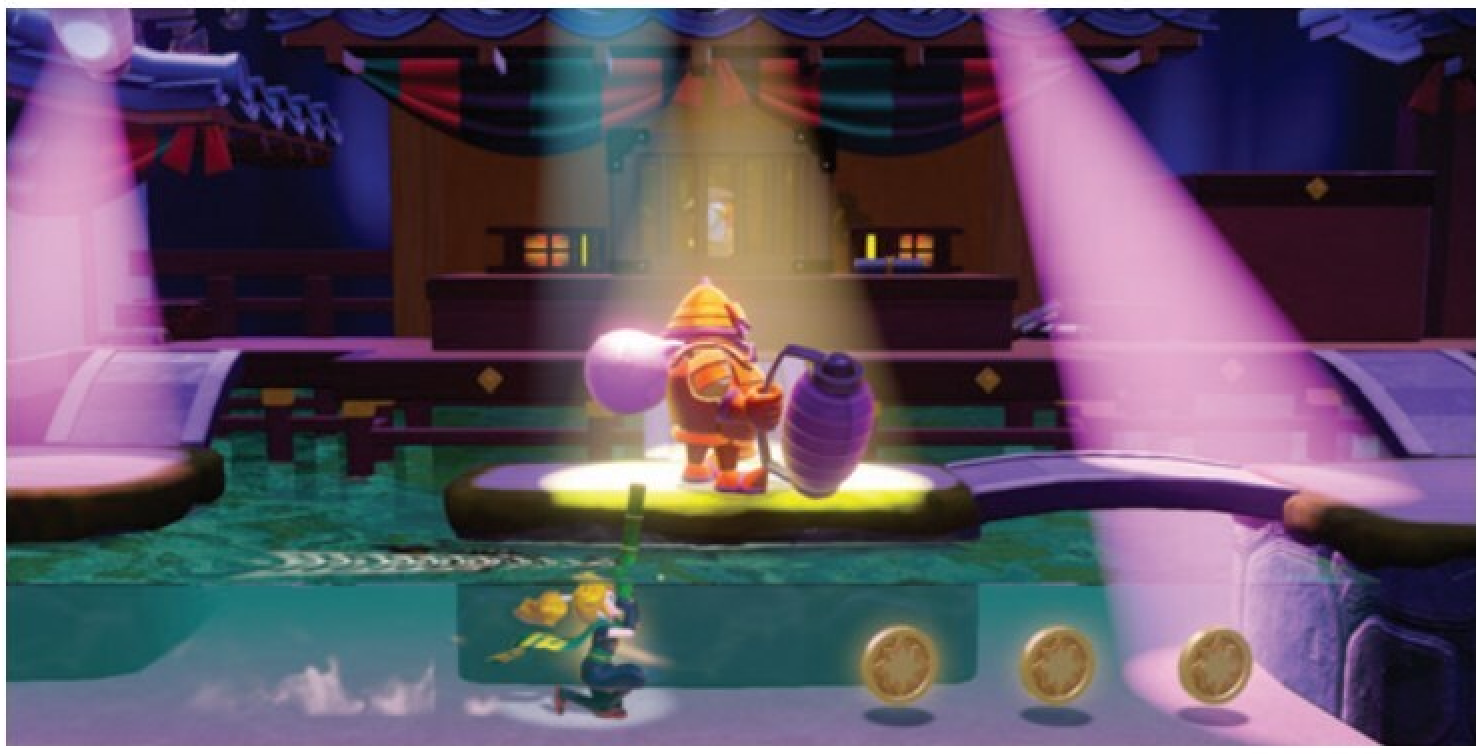
My hands-on demo begins on the Sparkle Theater's first floor, where I can enter four doorways in any order, each leading to a uniquely themed stage. Along the first path, I find a group of Theets, the bashful stewards of the playhouse, lamenting the theft of their baked sweets. With the help of a guardian named Stella, who gifts Peach a magic ribbon, I use my new ability to transform the Theets into sous-chefs who then draft a plan to prepare fresh pastries.

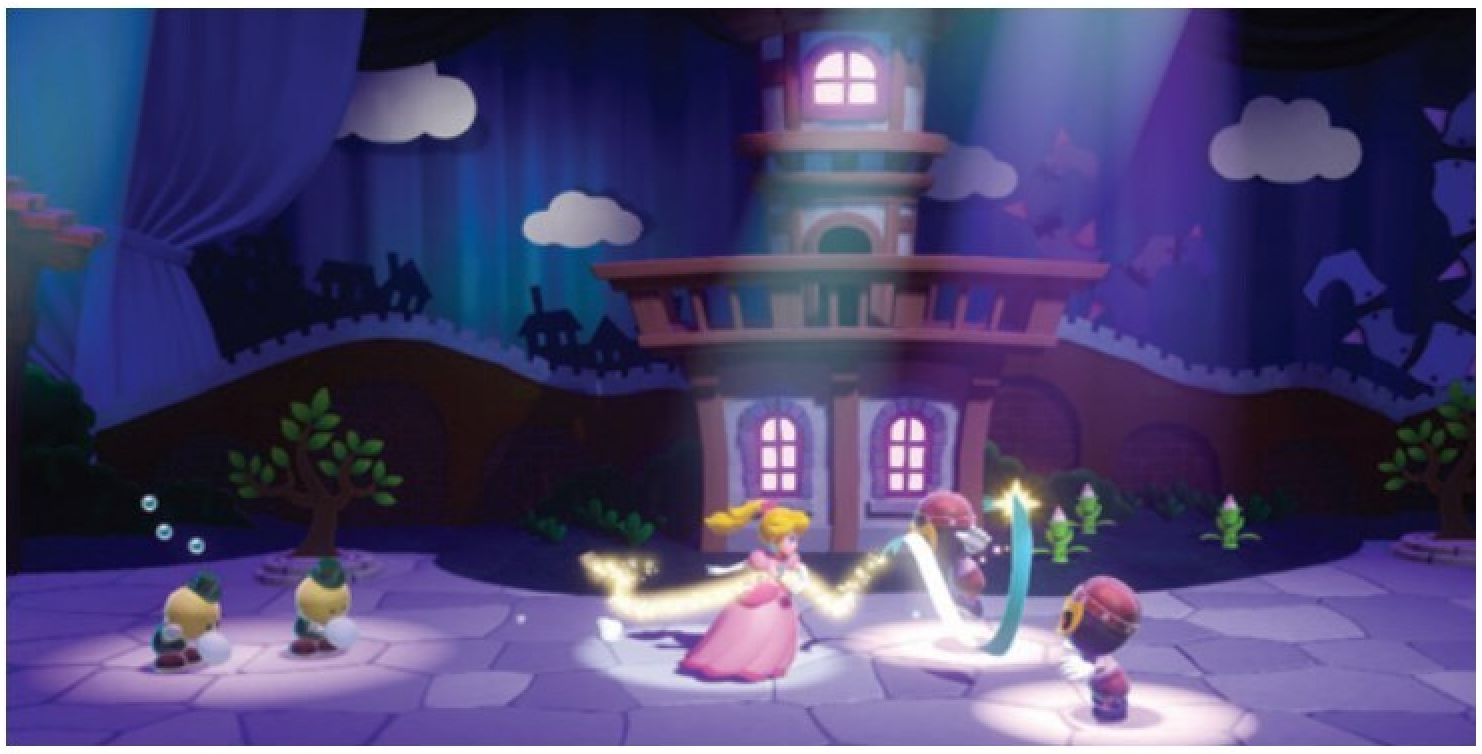
I run an errand to a nearby farming set to collect necessary confection-making ingredients. However, I discover the head baker has disappeared when I return to the kitchen, and Peach must take their place. Using Stella's ribbon, Peach transforms into a patisserie outfit and begins a series of enjoyable Mario Party-like mini-games. In one, you must repeatedly tap the action button to leaven dough to make the fluffiest bread possible, but you can ruin the dish if you overmix it. The next mini-game is my favorite: Peach must decorate a batch of cakes according to increasingly complex designs before time runs out. The delicacy transforms into a beautiful display if you follow the instructions correctly, making for a satisfying conclusion.

After getting the play back on track, Peach visits other theaters that offer a familiar loop: rescue Theets from The Sour Bunch, help rebuild stage decorations, and unlock new transformations before confronting boss fights and other third-act encounters.







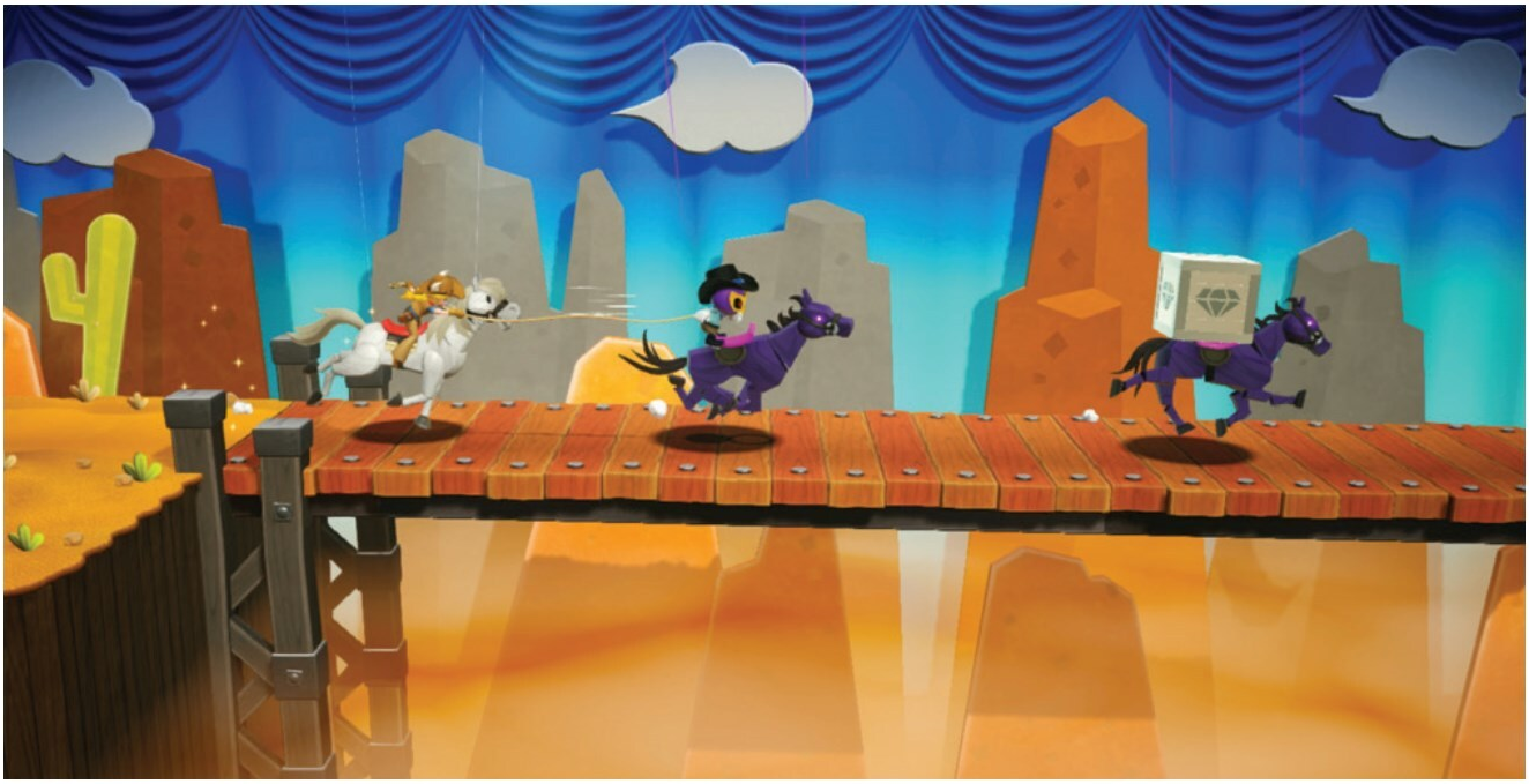


Princess Peach: Showtime particularly excels in the variety it offers through these transformations. Cowboy Peach is a blast to control, lassoing and throwing barrels at bosses while dodging incoming projectiles. Swordfighter Peach feels less inventive compared to off-the-wall variations like Figure Skater Peach, who competes in an ice skating competition against mind-controlled athletes. Lastly, Ninja Peach must evade watchtowers and patrolling guards with camouflage and wall-running abilities, which is novel when set against the backdrop of the Mushroom Kingdom.

As aesthetically appealing as they are, the Sparkle Theater's sets are sometimes a pain to navigate – mostly during small platforming segments wherein the 2D camera is at odds with the player's ability to move Peach in a 3D space. While it's frustrating to miss the occasional jump, it's even more frustrating when the fixed camera perspective causes you to miss out on a collectible, some of which require you to replay the level if you miss them.

I'm eager to try out more transformations like Dashing Thief Peach or Mighty Peach, the latter resembling Proto Man from the Mega Man series, but I'm still curious how much time we'll get with each. Overall, Princess Peach: Showtime seems to fit well within Nintendo's catalog of mascot action games, seemingly blending gameplay from Kirby and The Forgotten Land and Mario Party's mini-games to make for a rousing return to the spotlight for Princess Peach. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** March 22



FINAL FANTASY XVI: THE RISING TIDE

A DLC dose of Leviathan

Final Fantasy XVI, the latest wholly new single-player installment in one of gaming's most storied franchises, is nearing its first anniversary this June. After the surprise release of its Echoes of the Fallen DLC, which focused Clive and Co.'s efforts on combat in a single dungeon, Square Enix is readying its final announced batch of FFXVI content with The Rising Tide DLC. Announced at The Game Awards back in December alongside the reveal and shadow drop of Echoes of the Fallen, The Rising Tide features Leviathan, the water Eikon mysteriously absent from the main game's events.

While that reveal trailer promises some watery Eikonic action in the DLC, which takes place before the finale of FFXVI, little else is known about it. But Game Informer spoke to FFXVI producer Naoki Yoshida and DLC director Takeo Kujiraoka to learn more. The first thing I asked the duo about the DLC is why Leviathan was left out of the game. It turns out Square Enix was playing smart and leaving something on the table for the team to examine with potential DLC.

"In terms of making the decision of creating and selling a DLC, we had to wait until the game was actually released," Yoshida tells me through a translator, explaining Square Enix wanted to see if demand for more FFXVI was there. "That being said, we actually did think of a possible route, a possible story, that we could do if we were to do one."

That's why, in the base game, the route to the tower where Echoes of the Fallen takes place was present from the jump. Fans have speculated that a mysterious head-shaped crystal stuck into the side of a continent in FFXVI might be Leviathan or at least related to the god – that remains unclear, but if so, it shows another example of Square Enix creating doors for it to open with DLC such as The Rising Tide.

With it taking place before the game's finale, I was curious if Clive obtaining Leviathan powers would affect the ending. Yoshida says it won't and that the ending will remain as is. However, "You will get a deeper understanding of how the world of Valisthea is and how the characters are in Final Fantasy XVI," he adds, stopping short to prevent himself from spoiling too much.

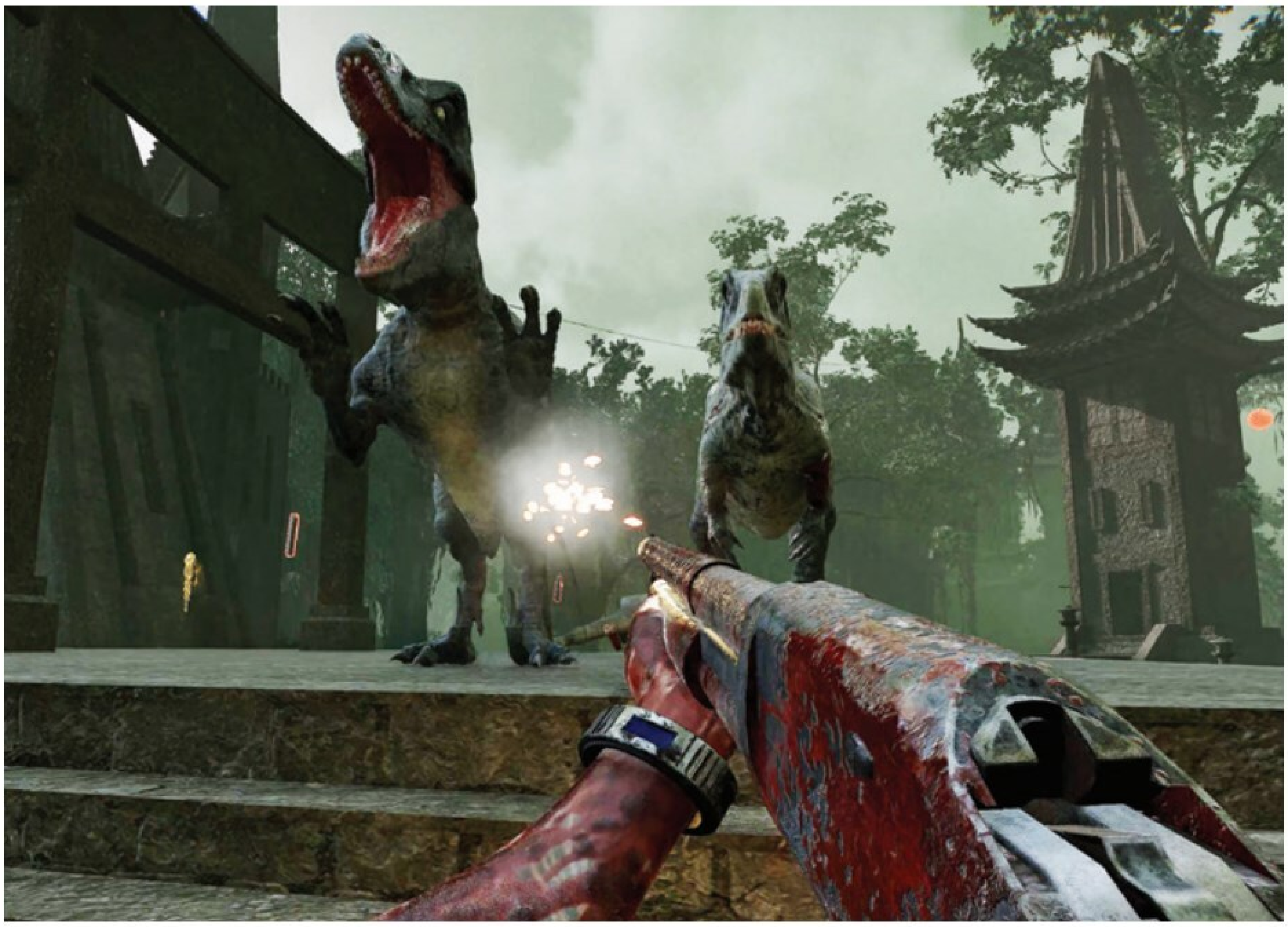
Anyone who's played FFXVI knows the Eikon fights are the highlight of the experience, which means Clive's forthcoming bout with Leviathan carries some lofty expectations. Kujiraoaka, who led design on the Eikon battles in the base game, says he understands that but approached Leviathan like any other: "[ensuring] that we were moving these Eikons in the way that players envision and imagine."

"In terms of what players can expect for this battle, when you look back at past Final Fantasy titles, there actually aren't many cases where you see Leviathan moving around crazy and in a real-time action battle system," Kujiraoaka says.

With the Phoenix Eikon fight reminiscent of third-person on-rail shooters and the Ifrit fight inspired by professional wrestling, I wondered how Kujiraoaka would describe Leviathan's inspiration. He plays coy, explaining there isn't one word or genre to describe it. "One thing I can say is that there's going to be a lot of water involved – visually, graphically, there's going to be a lot of attacks made from Levithan and that comes with a lot of water. It's going to look really different from past Eikon battles, and that's one thing that players can look forward to."

Unlike Echoes of the Fallen, which runs about three hours, this Leviathan DLC features around 10 hours of content, and I can't wait. The Rising Tide DLC for FFXVI has no release date but is due out this spring. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix
RELEASE TBA



SON AND BONE

Dinosaur, meet shotgun

Sometimes, a great idea can come from a simple premise. That's how Son and Bone, the next game from TeamKill Media, the studio behind last year's Quantum Error, came to be: a first-person shooter where you kill dinosaurs. Inspired by the dormant Turok series, TeamKill's lead developer Micah Jones remarks about a joke the studio's fans have made since the reveal of its dinosaur shooter at the top of the year. "They say, 'If other game companies won't do it, these developers will,'" Jones says, explaining that everyone on the team is a big fan of the Turok series.

After watching roughly 10 minutes of new Son and Bone gameplay, the Turok inspiration is clear, but so are its fast-paced arcade roots. "We like tactical, realistic stuff, but in this scenario, we were definitely seeking to be what you'd call a boomer shooter today, something more arcade-y and focused on chaotic gameplay." That's why I saw the kind of stuff the Doom series popularized: floating neon ammo and weapon pickups, gory execution kills activated by clicking R3 when an enemy flashes orange, the kind of movement that feels as if your field-of-view is cranked high, and plenty of blood. In a game where the premise is about killing dinosaurs, the boomer shooter gameplay feels like a perfect fit.

At the start of the game, Sheriff Samson is protecting a small town, but some bad things happen: bandits kill some people and take others hostage, and he goes after them. What transpires afterward involves aliens, their survival gauntlet featuring dinosaurs, other humans, and more created to see which DNA to use to create the perfect life form, and different worlds and timelines. Samson is modified with dinosaur DNA, which is why he has super strength and other inhuman abilities, and cares less about surviving this alien gauntlet and more about returning to Earth safely with the kidnapped people.

Jones says players can expect to fight mostly dinosaurs, but there are also human enemies, human-hybrid-dinosaur foes, and more. In my preview, I saw hostile alligators, snakes, raptors, and a passive brachiosaurus (that will turn hostile if you attack it). Players can expect t-rex enemies and other dinosaur classics like the spitting dilophosaurus that paints the screen with black effects and the spiky ankylosaurus. Players will have to handle Turok-style platforming over wooden docks, rocks jutting out of the ground, traps, and more. A laser lasso that acts as a grappling hook aims to make movement even more dynamic in combat and when platforming.

Son and Bone, like TeamKill's other games, is visually impressive, and Jones says the team aims to look triple-A in that regard. But he also notes that as a team of four based in Montana – TeamKill was started in 2016 by four Jones brothers and remains that today – sometimes that can backfire. At an indie scale, mechanically, it's hard to compete with multimillion-dollar first-person shooters like Call of Duty and Doom.

"We like the challenge, but it is hard, and we can't do everything a big company can do," Jones says, explaining how TeamKill's visual style also ends up getting its games lumped into comparisons with triple-A releases. "We're definitely going to try to meet that level every time, even if we're small. Since [Son and Bone] is a smaller, more focused game, it should be easier to deliver a very polished triple-A quality of feel and gameplay since it won't have all these massively complicated mechanics.

"It's all a learning experience, and I like to look towards triple-A as a goal. If we fall short, we're small and we learn from that."

The dinosaur shooting will hopefully continue sooner rather than later as TeamKill is targeting a summer or fall release window for Son and Bone. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** TeamKill Media
DEVELOPER TeamKill Media **RELEASE** 2024

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Keeping the faith

I played Dragon's Dogma on my PlayStation 3 when it launched in 2012 because I thought the cover looked interesting. I had a newfound appreciation for the fantasy RPG genre thanks to the prior year's release of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and the title was cool; it was that simple. Playing the game, however, was not. Dragon's Dogma is still probably the most challenging modern fantasy RPG this side of From Software.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, after three hours of hands-on time, Dragon's Dogma 2 feels just like the first game. And that's great, even if it means players new to the series will likely go through the struggles I did in Dragon's Dogma more than a decade ago.

That is one of the first things I ask director Hideaki Itsuno about in Capcom's San Francisco office.

"We definitely think that people who enjoyed the first Dragon's Dogma will enjoy this game," Itsuno says. "We definitely had to aim for that, but also, it's made in a way for people that really want to get immersed in this world, that want to roleplay in this world – it has been designed and balanced so that these kinds of people can gain satisfaction from it."

However, Itsuno says there are elements in the game to bridge the gap between newcomers and fans of the series, like NPCs that provide directions and hints to objectives, the unique Pawn system that lets you hire specific types of help, and more he wanted to save for the final release.

While those systems are present, I'm happy to report Dragon's Dogma 2 kicked my butt more than once during my three hours with it.

The first preview section places my Mystic Spearhand, which uses a magic-imbued spear to take down enemies, in a checkpoint town en route to my destination. My objective is to reach Battahl, but I never do. Instead, Dragon's Dogma 2 quickly inundates me with side quest after side quest. Every few steps I take in town are met with an NPC telling me about a missing kid, a unique stone they want, or something else. I attempt to complete as many as possible before enough in-game time passed that doing so isn't possible. For example, the missing kid presumably died by the wolves I was supposed to reach and defeat but didn't. And if I had to guess, the stone I needed was probably found by someone else, which is why I failed the quest.

The passage of time in Dragon's Dogma 2 is important, and it adds a level of immersion not often seen in the genre – wait too long to help someone in need and they might perish because of your negligence. Mind you, I tried to complete these quests, but the tough-as-nails combat presented a surprising level of difficulty on the way to objectives. Like the original Dragon's Dogma, combat is hard, with enemies sparing no expense to take advantage of openings with wallop after wallop.

A griffin with four health bars looking to eat some of the wolves attacking me doesn't help the situation either, and I soon realize I have no shot of taking it down in my current state. My escape attempt is how I learn you shouldn't jump off high cliffs.

The second section of this preview places my Magick Archer in Battahl, the town I could not reach in the first half of my play session. In this small village built into a red canyon, I attempt to help someone restore a special regalia sword, but a side quest that piques my interest stops me again. Instead, I spend my time attempting to find an assailant in a crowd of people by identifying them with clues I receive, like that their hair is tied back and their right arm injured. I fail to do so in time, though, and the royal figure of the town is assassinated – whoops!

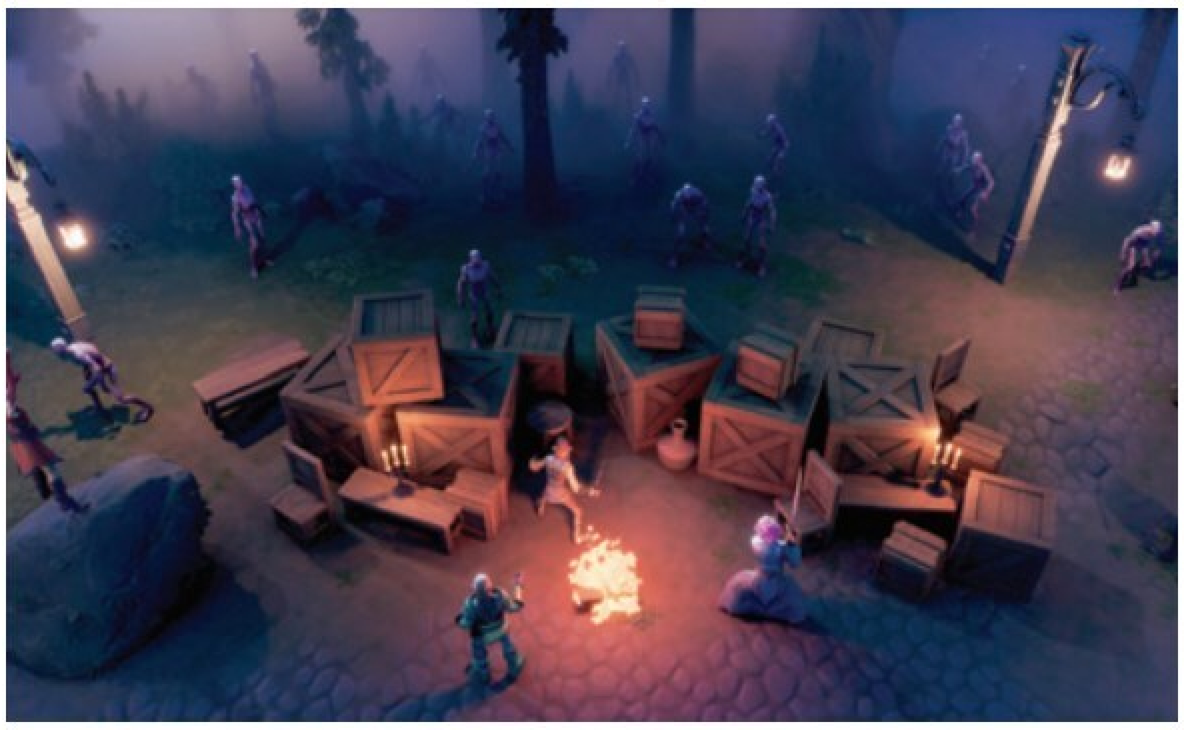
There is no going back from this; I failed the mission and the world permanently changed. I'm glad I spent time picking through the half-dozen side quests I received during this preview because this is where Dragon's Dogma 2 shines. It highlights the game's brutal sense of adventure, reminds me my every action matters, and lets me take part in 20-minute encounters against towering ogres seemingly impervious to my magical arrows (it turns out shooting off their spiky armor and scaling their backs to stab their eyes is the way to go, by the way).

I ask Itsuno if the decade of space between the first game and this sequel allowed the team to observe what others, like CD Projekt Red with The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, were doing in the genre. After playing Dragon's Dogma 2 for three hours, I should have known the answer after feeling the familiar difficulty of that first 2012 game: Nope.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** March 22

PROJECT O.R.C.S.

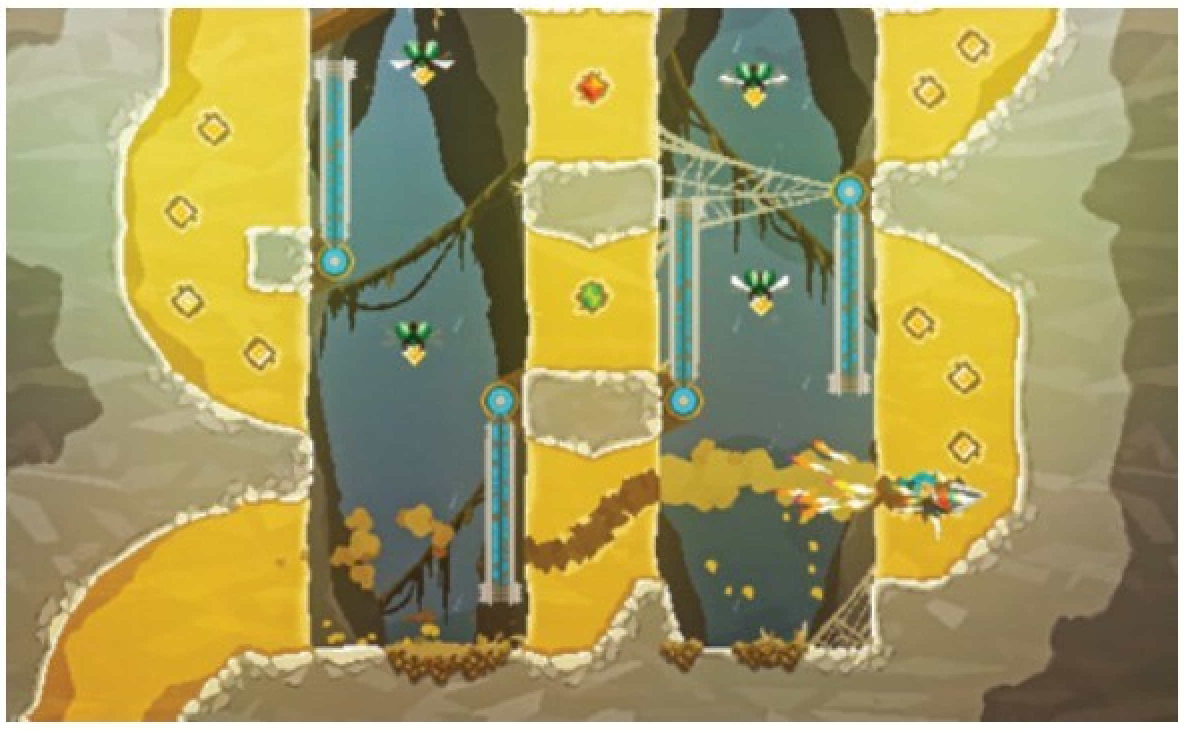


If you want to take a step toward proper tabletop role-playing games but find big books too intimidating, Project O.R.C.S. is a great way to test the waters. It's a digital D&D-like you can play with friends with lots of room for improvisation. It gives players all the tools they need to have a fantasy adventure, complete with pre-built, customizable maps, a simple battle system, and guided adventures that fit all experience levels. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** Online Multiplayer Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Lightforge Games **DEVELOPER** Lightforge Games **RELEASE** TBA

PEPPER GRINDER

In Pepper Grinder, you discover an impressive drill that lets you swim through the ground like a fish. You can also use the drill to defeat enemies and launch yourself from the underground to high-up places. The game's platforming speed is impressive, and its pixel-art style perfectly recalls another era of video game platformers. Hands-on with the game only confirms that it feels as good as it looks in various trailers. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

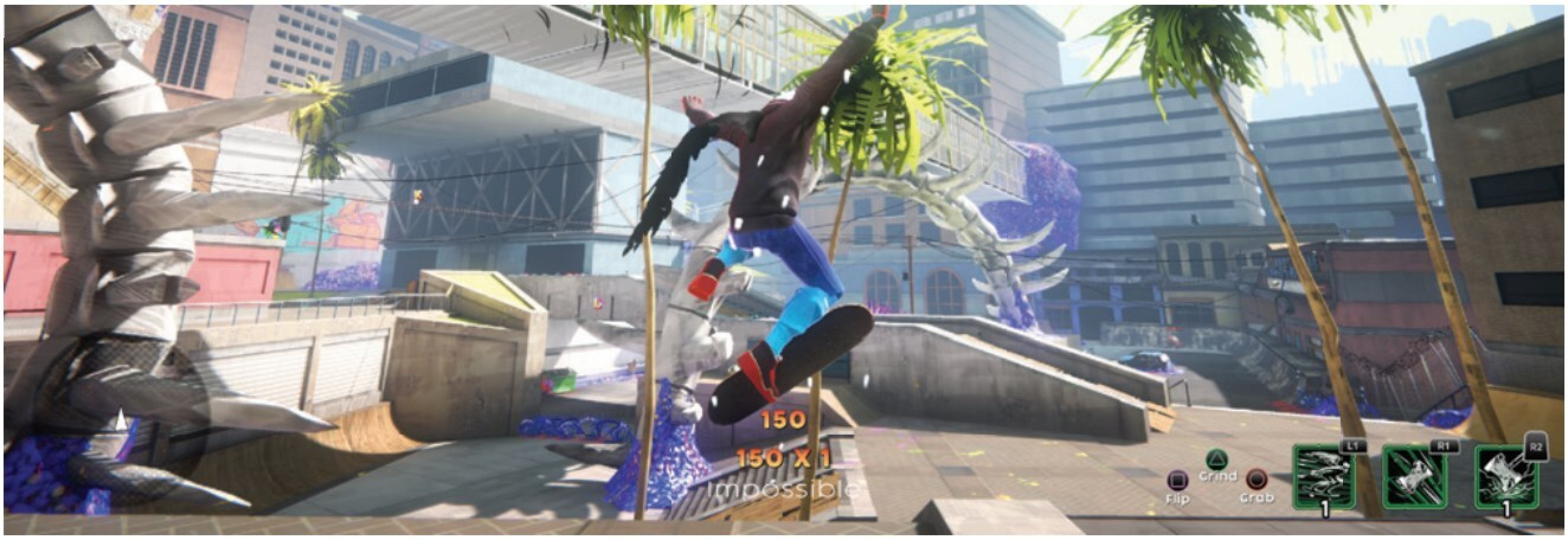


PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Ahr Ech **RELEASE** March 28

HELSKATE

In Helskate, you are attempting to escape Hell on a skateboard. This means pulling off Tony Hawk-style tricks (the game's director was a designer on Tony Hawk's Underground) while fighting demons with a sword. Every run mixes up the levels and relocates collectibles while you try out different randomized upgrades to see what works the best. This roguelite is currently in early access on Steam with intentions to fully release soon. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Kowloon, Phantom Coast
DEVELOPER Phantom Coast **RELEASE** 2024

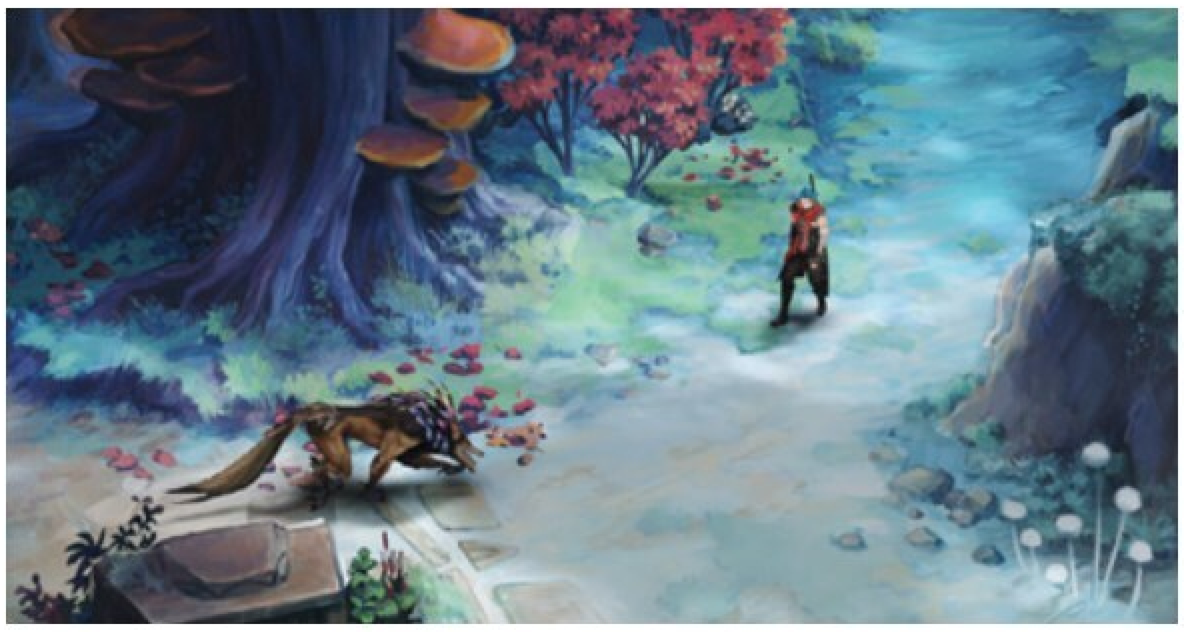


GIGANTIC: RAMPAGE EDITION

Developer Abstraction Games aims to resurrect Gigantic, the MOBA-hero-shooter hybrid that went offline only a year after its full release. As an ardent fan of the original, jumping into Gigantic: Rampage Edition is invigorating. Explosive fights erupt across the map's many paths and objectives as each team races to expose and defeat the opposing squad's Guardian with stylish spells and ultimate abilities. Notably, Gearbox Publishing is leaving the original's free-to-play structure in the rearview, ditching microtransactions altogether for a $19.99 premium version featuring two new heroes, maps, and updated systems. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 10-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Gearbox Publishing **DEVELOPER** Abstraction Games **RELEASE** April 9

LOST HELLDEN



Lost Hellden is a hand-painted action RPG with an intriguing premise. In the world of Era, each person is tied to one of the seven deadly sins at birth, and they'll turn into a mindless beast if they ever succumb to that temptation. The exception to this is protagonist Cyphel, who journeys through the world in search of his twin brother. With beautiful landscape shots and a score by Final Fantasy XII's Hitoshi Sakimoto, 2025 can't come soon enough. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Artisan Studios **DEVELOPER** Artisan Studios **RELEASE** 2025

SONIC X SHADOW GENERATIONS

In 2011, Sega celebrated Sonic's 20th anniversary with Sonic Generations, a well-liked greatest hits-style remake of various iconic stages from the series' history. Now, 13 years later, that package is remastered for modern platforms with better visuals, new challenges, and other content. But on top of that, players can enjoy new story content and levels starring Sonic's dark doppelganger Shadow when the game arrives this fall. **BY BRIAN SHEA** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Platforming
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Sonic Team **RELEASE** Fall

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GI MUST PLAY

PERSONA 3 RELOAD

Into the light

6/16 Tue
Evening
HALF
21
Log
Auto
FFWD

Fuuka Yamagishi

Hehe, I think manga is a respectable form of literature. Maybe I'll try reading here as well...

Persona 3 is perhaps the most important entry in the Shin Megami Tensei spin-off franchise. By establishing several series mainstays, including the popular Social Links system, Persona 3 laid the foundation upon which the next two mainline entries were built. Unfortunately, by today's standards, the 18-year-old title is unapproachable in many ways. Persona 3 Reload remedies that, bringing forward the outstanding cast, story, and turn-based battles in a faithful remake with the modern amenities of Persona 5 Royal. While it's a massive success, some outdated elements from the original prevent Reload from reaching the heights of other modern games in the series.

In a premise familiar to Persona fans, you control a transfer student arriving at his new high school. However, when night falls, it's far from an ordinary schoolkid's existence as you enter an anomaly known as the Dark Hour. Here, everyone is confined to coffins except for powerful humans who wield magical entities known as Personas. Using these, the cast hunts down Shadows around the city, primarily in a procedurally generated tower known as Tartarus.

I love exploiting the combat system's many quirks. Landing a critical hit with one character before shifting to another to hit an elemental weakness, then polishing the foes off with a powerful All-Out Attack, is always thrilling. Controlling all characters in your party is a no-brainer by today's standards and a huge quality-of-life improvement over the original base game. In fact, nearly all the innovations from Persona 5 are present, and the addition of the Theurgy system diversified my combat strategies in fun ways.

Theurgies are powerful, cinematic ultimate abilities that charge over the course of battle. Since each character's meter charges (and each ability provides different effects), I often went out of my way to perform the character-specific actions – whether that be healing, summoning Personas, or attacking with physical abilities – during battles with lesser enemies. Entering a tough battle with a full party of charged meters always gave me a boost of confidence, even if they were far from instant-win buttons.

The battles are as exciting as the series has ever seen, but one key improvement from Persona 5 didn't make it into this remake: handcrafted dungeons. Even with this version's addition of Monad Doors housing powerful minibosses and special rewards, the randomly generated floors of Tartarus serving as the game's main dungeon feel outdated. After hours of dungeon-crawling, the experience becomes monotonous when you're climbing through hundreds of generic floors full of the same monsters. Thankfully, the boss battles and sequences leading up to them are as compelling as ever, delivering the best combat in the game and often revealing my favorite character moments in the story.

The excellent cast of Persona 3 is allowed to shine brighter than ever through additional voice acting and more social scenes. I loved balancing the social elements of a typical high school experience with the extraordinary circumstances presented to my protagonist. However, I am disappointed that the female protagonist option included in Persona 3 Portable is neither present nor the added epilogue from FES. In a modern remake arriving decades later, it's unfortunate to have content missing from older re-releases.

Due to modernized and expanded Social Links, I truly felt I got to know many of the supporting characters better. I became emotionally invested in stories involving a motivated track athlete pushing through an injury to inspire a younger family member, an elderly couple coping with the loss of their son, and a young girl struggling amidst her parents' divorce.

Forming bonds with these characters grants boosts for certain Persona fusions, but I primarily pursued the Links to further unravel the narrative threads. Later, you can also form closer bonds with your party members, but even before that, you can awaken new abilities within your team by cooking, gardening, or watching movies with them at the dorm. Though stilted, repetitive animations sometimes took me out of the moment, Persona 3 Reload's emotional beats hit hard as the themes of death and loss resonate throughout this long story.

Even after nearly 100 hours, I was sad to part ways with my team, feeling as though I had formed bonds with them that transcend any kind of in-game Social Link metric. Even with some outdated and repetitive elements inherited through the 18-year-old structure of the original, Persona 3 Reload is one of the best entries in one of the most acclaimed modern role-playing franchises in video games. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Atlus **DEVELOPER** P-Studio **RELEASE** February 2 **RATING** M

GI MUST PLAY

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Cracking the planet wide open

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth has quite the act to follow up – it must both live up to the sky-high expectations set by its predecessor, Final Fantasy VII Remake, and synthesize and modernize perhaps the most crucial chapter in our heroes' adventure across Gaia. While my 80 hours in Rebirth didn't quite match the overall nirvana of Remake, it's a game I struggled to put down. A few stumbling blocks, like a bloated and sometimes tedious open world and intermittently uneven pacing, threaten the highs of Rebirth. But an exciting and well-told story, with an awe-inspiring finale to boot, almost made me forget the lows. The final result is a flawed but deeply reverent love letter to one of gaming's most beloved RPGs.

Finally out of Midgar, Cloud, Aerith, Tifa, Barret, and Red XIII embark on a continent-hopping journey to stop Sephiroth from executing his plan to destroy the planet, starting with a visit to the city of Kalm. Like Midgar before, Kalm is lovingly recreated from polygonal pathways into a fully realized town. Seeing such a familiar location through the lens of 2024 for the first time is a treat, and it's a feeling carried throughout the entire game.

Surrounding each of these iconic locations is a sprawling open area dotted with side quests, combat challenges, card game matches, treasure caches, intel towers, scavenger hunts, and more. While exciting at first, realizing that each open-world area in Rebirth consists of the same objectives grew more disappointing as time passed. Much of it is good fun, carried by excellent combat and strong connections to the world and lore of Final Fantasy VII, but more variety would have gone a long way to sprucing up my time outside of story content.

Where the standard area objectives rarely stray from the formula established early on, the side quests, which range from fine and forgettable to great, sprinkled throughout each region, provide levity and a nice touch of weirdness to the world of Cloud and his friends. Traversing these lands can be tedious at times, especially in areas where specific Chocobo mechanics, like mushroom-hopping and wind gliding, are required, and my frustrations with Rebirth's overfilled open world peaked in these moments.

But old and new story beats pulled me out of those dumps. Some of my favorite original Final Fantasy VII moments are given new life with beautiful visuals and expanded exposition. Fighting new foes and classic bosses with Rebirth's combat, which further builds on Remake's real-time action-strategy system, is exhilarating. Additional party members, like Red XIII, Yuffie, and Cait Sith, inject new layers of defensiveness, speed, and whimsy, respectively, into the mix.

Square Enix nails almost every story beat, expanding on the lore in ways I didn't know I wanted while remaining faithful to the original narrative, but falters a few times with needlessly overstuffed chapters.

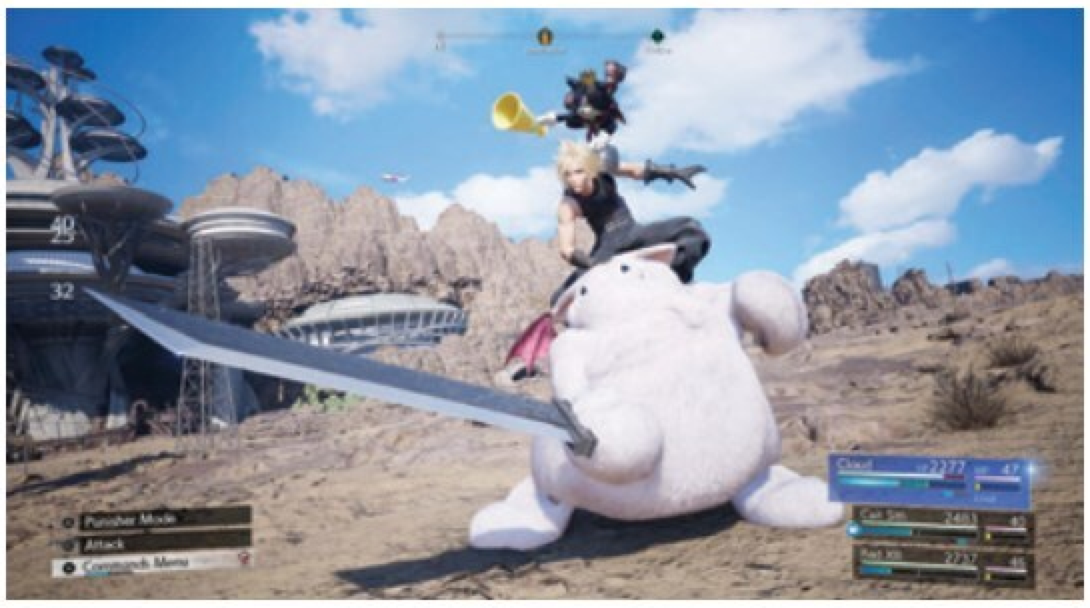
Cloud's' fight to catch and stop Sephiroth takes a backseat throughout much of the adventure, giving them time to work through their emotions together as most are venturing beyond where they've ever been in this world. Those discussions and growing bonds weave in and out of combat, where new Synergy Abilities provide meaningful boosts to Rebirth's action in various ways. These abilities and other skills directly improve Cloud's standing with his party, opening opportunities for additional insight and raising a special relationship meter.

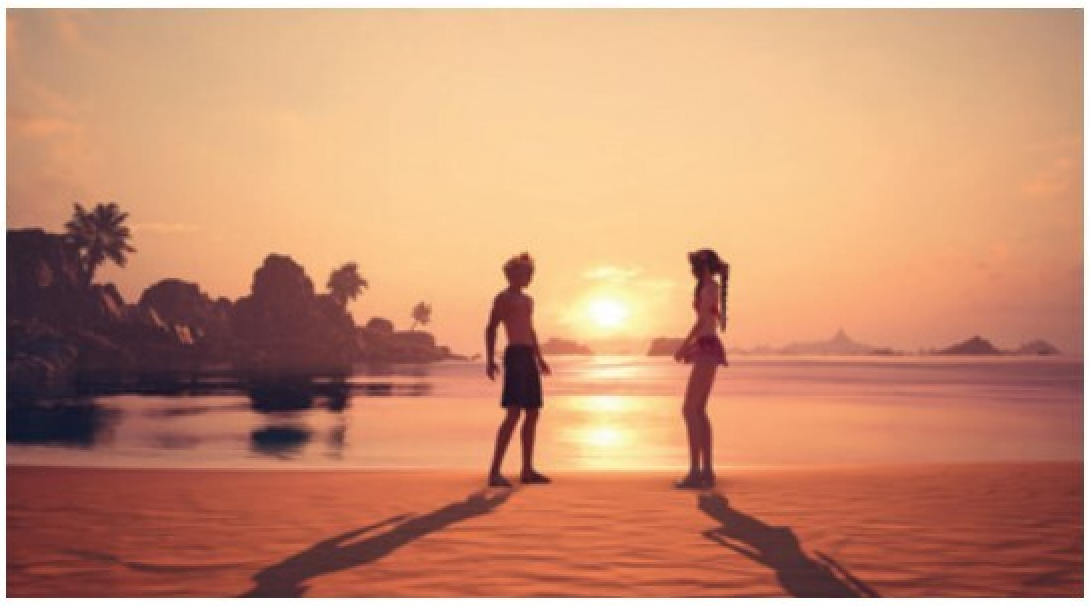
Sephiroth's sparse screentime makes each appearance by the One-Winged Angel all the more terrifying, culminating in a final act that broke my mind in the best way, both as a test of my combat abilities and my understanding of Final Fantasy VII. Square Enix already made clear to players where this game comes to a close, but the finale, which best serves fans rather than first-time players, isn't any less wondrous because of that. Rebirth's score matches the heights of this closing act and the rest of the game, with gorgeous tear-inducing arrangements, jazz-fusion bops, and an eclectic mix of new songs and old favorites.

This sequel went wide, and while that comes with benefits, like new ways to explore this beloved world and its various sights, it also comes with drawbacks. They aren't unlike anything fans of the genre have experienced before, and playing as cherished characters certainly eases the pain, but the tedium and bloat of the open-world checklist can sometimes get in the way of where Rebirth truly shines. The best of Remake exists in Rebirth, but the various open-world areas surrounding it, the parts that make Rebirth unique from its predecessor, sometimes miss the mark. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing/Action **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** February 29 **RATING** T





GRANBLUE FANTASY: RELINK

The borders of the skies

The thrill of adventure in a boundless playground tickles the imagination, something intimately familiar to players of Granblue Fantasy, a mobile/browser-based title that has been a hit internationally for over a decade. The original title resembles 16-bit turn-based RPGs, leaving daydreams of grander scale and exploits a hopeful wish rather than an inevitable reality. With Granblue Fantasy: Relink, developer Cygames has an opportunity to explore a fantasy world of open skies and magic while pulling the game from a comparatively modest mobile title into a full-blown 3D action game. While not completely successful, Granblue Fantasy: Relink should be lauded for getting most of the way to being a memorable title, but it needed a little more ambition and unique content to reach that goal.

Relink guides players through a single-player campaign with the crew of the *Grandcypher*, a band of skyfarers that has combat-resolved adventures on every new island it comes across. For this title, a wholly original island and story was created, tasking the crew with rescuing one of their own by defeating giant monsters called Primal Beasts and defeating a sorceress controlling them.

Those unfamiliar with the story and characters of Granblue Fantasy will not find Relink particularly interested in catching the player up. Small vignettes of how the characters met and how they arrived at the latest pitstop island that sets up this game's adventures are essentially all the player receives without the aid of fanmade wikis filling in the rest.

The single-player campaign, while short, presents interesting plights like climbing toward a wind god at the top of a blustery mountain or taking back a castle from an invading force. Players take control of an unlockable cast of 19 characters with different fighting styles and special moves to follow a somewhat basic storyline that does not take too many big or unpredictable swings.

These characters all share a similar template of using four special moves and movement options, but they vary significantly in special skills and meters. My favorite character bounced on top of enemies and specialized in parries on the ground, but a late unlock focused more on transformations and building up meter, making even just those two feel distinct.

Unfortunately, levels are largely linear pathways without much in the way of exploration. The endless skies and hovering islands are rarely used for anything but backgrounds and transference to the next fight, leaving little reason to poke your nose anywhere but the most linear path. A world where the characters talk about inexhaustible space for escapades and capers but spend much of their time in caves and on walkways is incongruent in a way that grates as time goes on.

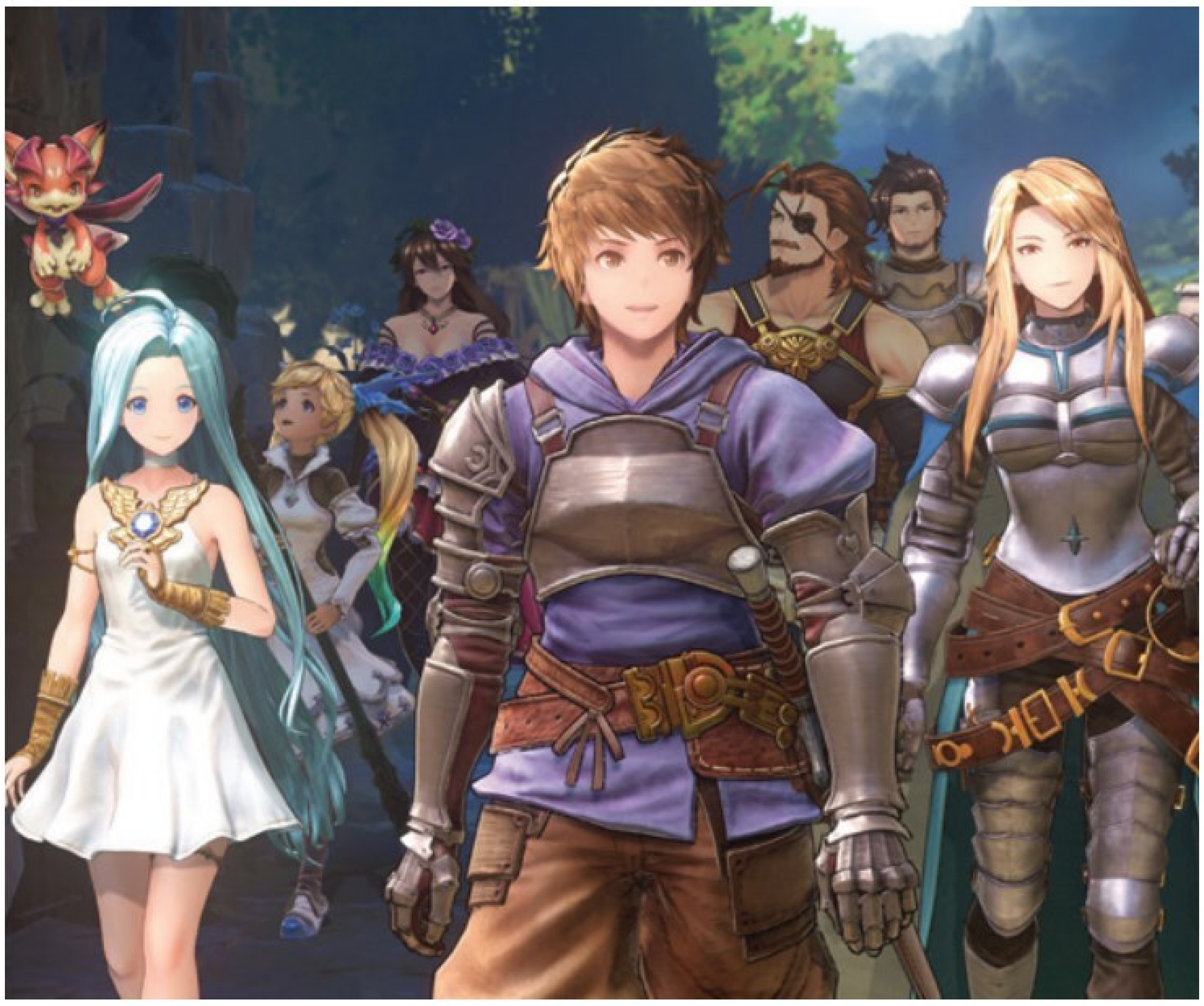
After completing the single-player campaign, players can take combat quests that can be played co-op with friends or strangers. Difficulty rises alongside progressing ranks, and characters must power up through elective means like skill trees and weapons to keep up. By endgame, keeping a team powerful enough to solo these missions requires a lot of grinding, but focusing on one character discourages variety, especially when there is the option of 18 others to use. There is no real way to work around this grind, which wants you to redo missions over and over to get admittedly guaranteed materials and experience to upgrade, though the reversal from how smooth the early game's progress felt can act as a frustrating brick wall.

Endgame bosses are monstrous with equally gargantuan HP bars, making battles tedious. Unlike Monster Hunter, your quarry never escapes or requires different strategies, and the likelihood of powering through any knock-out state means the player is mainly in a race against ending the battle before getting bored.

The saving grace of these extended gameplay encounters is that the combat is reasonably engaging, and interactions between characters will likely delight existing Granblue Fantasy fans. Relink is unlikely to be any newcomer's favorite game. Still, the basic gameplay is fun and keeps you moving along the treadmill, especially if you have a gathering of like-minded source material fans to help you slay its biggest figurative and literal dragons. **BY IMRAN KHAN**

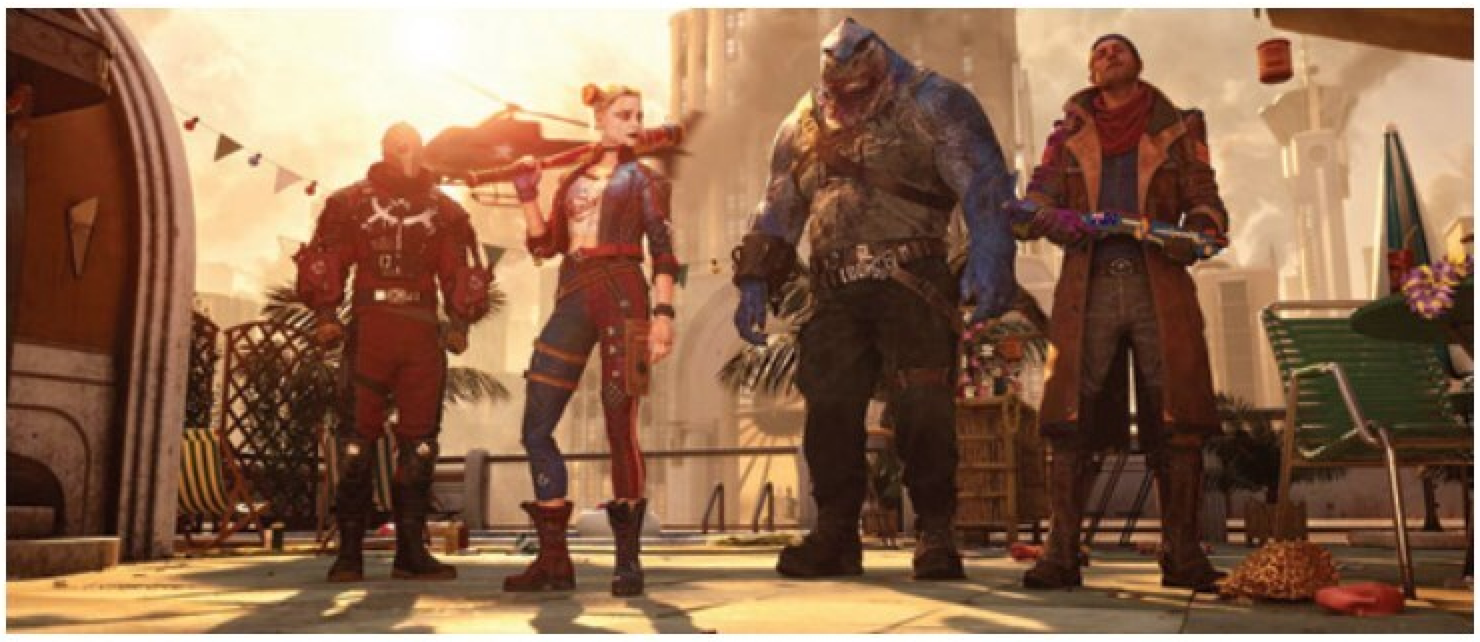
7

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Cygames **DEVELOPER** Cygames **RELEASE** February 1 **RATING** T



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Noise and confusion



Years ago, when I first heard about the provocative title for Rocksteady's follow-up to the Arkham games, I recall wondering what mental gymnastics were in store to not actually murder the well-liked central characters of the DC mythos, including the version of Batman the studio had so expertly developed over prior titles. Credit where it's due: Rocksteady followed through, and Kill the Justice League does just that. Unfortunately, it also killed my interest or enthusiasm through a story that feels juvenile and callous alongside repetitive and confusing gameplay.

Suicide Squad is a high-octane action shooter where rapid urban traversal and uproarious gun combat are your non-stop companions. A ragtag crew of criminals, including Harley Quinn, Deadshot, Captain Boomerang, and King Shark, must fight through the devastated city of Metropolis, gradually offing the heroes of Earth after they've been brainwashed by the villain, Brainiac. Each of the four characters has their variation in how they fling themselves across the city and an upgrade path that allows for some specialization. Still, the core idea is pulling triggers, throwing grenades, and bashing into alien invaders. Each acrobatic navigation style takes some time to master, but I ultimately enjoyed the sense of speed and mobility. In combat, however, the constant vertical up-and-down effect is the first of many issues that make it hard to track what's happening.

By default, an incredibly crowded HUD is almost nonsensically busy; the biggest challenge of important fights wasn't the battle itself but simply seeing what was happening. The HUD may be customized and minimized, but you're left with the opposite problem and too little information to complete tasks. Enemies have some functional variety but lack visual distinctiveness, adding to a pervasive sense of monotony where all the mission types bleed together into one chaotic smashfest.

Frequent cutscenes exhibit excellent animation and artwork on characters, especially showcasing some emotive facial expressions. Even with that advantage, the storytelling fails on numerous levels. It's hard to enjoy a story where I don't like anybody; everyone is endlessly spouting bad one-liners, trash-talking, and shouting at each other. Beyond that tonal disconnect, the narrative is weirdly inconsistent and hard to parse, often with the leads feeling almost like side characters in their own story.

Progress through the game involves gear and character improvement by completing side missions; many tasks set overly specific requirements that rob the combat of variety, like only critical hits or certain types of melees to do damage. The more crafted main missions (especially the ones to take out League members) are more attractive, but are, without exception, weirdly anti-climactic and end with such bleak death scenes that any potential humor is blunted.

Online cooperative play works well. Especially after the short campaign's conclusion, four friends could have a good time leaping and swinging around the city, blowing up bad guys in repetitive but action-packed missions. Unfortunately, I never warmed to the player investment loop. Many character upgrades are invisible beyond changes to things like the percentage of damage dealt or how long a power might last. Gear is more compelling, with some unique effects on the best weapons, but it all starts to feel the same after several hours. Post-campaign rewards and activities make a fervent effort to keep players engaged, but I found most to be new window dressing on existing mission types.

Suicide Squad is technically sound, and the action can be fast, frantic, and occasionally fun. The game could be considered a deconstruction and satirizing of the superhero concept. But for me, the whole thing feels mean-spirited, pessimistic, and glib. I suppose it can be fun to piss all over any sense of genuine heroism in a comic book-inspired tale, but it can't come as a great shock when some fans like myself just aren't interested in the bloody and smug results. **BY MATT MILLER**

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios **RELEASE** February 2 **RATING** M

HELLDIVERS 2

Bullet heaven

Nearly 10 years on from 2015's Helldivers, Helldivers 2 carefully adapts the simple yet exciting formula of bug-blasting with buddies for a modern audience. Arrowhead Game Studios has swapped the top-down perspective for third-person while maintaining the frenetic, ballistic loop of crash-landing on hostile planets, completing difficult missions, and extracting against all odds.

In a galaxy torn apart by war, you and your friends are Helldivers, the brainwashed protectors of Super Earth, invigorated by humorous trite aphorisms espousing patriotism and the importance of so-called democracy. Invading forces of menacing Automatons and craggy, organic Terminids threaten your way of life and have made their home on precious interstellar real estate. After earning the shining cape of "freedom" in the game's boot camp tutorial, you are set loose to tackle an impressive variety of punchy missions. Your objectives range from simple hive exterminations to complicated launch code recovery missions.

However, the exciting unpredictability of Helldivers 2 is secretly the game's best feature. Whether it's challenging terrain, wounded limbs, inclement weather, or a miscommunicated orbital strike that brutalizes your entire squad, your best-laid plans are destined to fall apart in devastating, hilarious fashion.

Combat in Helldivers 2 is all meat, no gristle. The movement feels fluid and reactive, whether you're sprinting to safety or comically leaping into prone to dodge the chainsaw arm of a lurching terminator. This means while you encounter similar biomes and objectives, the journey to meet your goals is always fraught with wonderful chaos. One great benefit to this system is Stratagems – abilities that can be accessed in combat by quickly inputting a sequence of D-pad button presses, like a Mortal Kombat Fatality.

After playing finger DDR, you're given a marker grenade to revive your teammates, resupply and call down offensive airstrikes, top-tier weaponry, minefields, and more. Getting the inputs wrong as bugs nip at your health induces a feverish cocktail of adrenaline and fear. However, when you do smash it in successfully and summon a shower of hellfire, saving your gunned-down compatriots, the heroism is intoxicating. Few games provide such powerful opportunities to play the hero as Helldivers 2.

The efficacy of each snappy run is dependent on who makes it off the planet and how many optional objectives you complete. Subsequently, this determines the XP, Requisition, Samples, and Medals you take home, an uncomplicated suite of resources used to develop your ship and purchase new weaponry, armor, and Stratagems. Helldivers 2 also offers free and premium battle passes and a Superstore where players can use a premium currency called 'Super Credits.' Thankfully, the paid content isn't overly intrusive and can easily be avoided as you progress through the campaign.

Helldivers 2's customizable kit makes it easy to specialize within teams; are you the ammo-carrying support act or the pyromaniac frontman dousing the battlefield in flames? Despite my efforts, I was my team's problem child, flush with airstrikes and mines that negotiated as many spectacular escapes as they did squad wipes. There's nothing quite as humbling (or humorous) as stumbling into your own minefield during a desperate sprint to the shuttle.

Beyond its refreshingly straightforward feedback loop, even more enthralling is how your personal success impacts the overall narrative. Helldivers 2 operates on a live map, with players around the world slowly liberating quadrants of planets, their actions influenced by Major Orders passed down by central control. In an already collaborative game, this compounds the sense of community, making you feel like you're part of something bigger than even the heady emotional beats of your squad's missions.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle Helldivers 2 has to face is its own success; servers have been overrun since launch, leading to lengthy wait times and faltering progression systems. Yet, for me, the indoctrination is just too strong. I'm still compelled to wait my turn to get another taste of sweet victory in this live-service diamond in the rough. **BY SARAH THWAITES**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 4-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Arrowhead Game Studios **RELEASE** February 8 **RATING** M

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG

The rivalry lives on

A developer can take many different approaches when remaking a game, but the primary goal always remains the same: to create a new experience that honors the spirit of the original. With Mario vs Donkey Kong, a remake of the 2004 Game Boy Advance title of the same name, Nintendo succeeds in this goal. By combining new worlds and modern quality-of-life features with the game's classic, delightful puzzle design, Mario vs. Donkey Kong is a strong start to Nintendo's 2024.

In the game's opening, Donkey Kong raids a toy factory where they make Mini Marios, the hottest new product on the market. To get them back, Mario must chase him down through eight worlds, each with two distinct halves. In the first chunk, he has to carry a key to a locked door, and in the second, he has to reach the Mini Mario located somewhere in the level. On paper, it runs the risk of becoming repetitive, but in practice, there's so much variety from level to level that I was never bored. With only six standard levels in each world, there's a lot of room to play with mechanics and level design, and I was constantly impressed with how the game kept me engaged. It's nothing revolutionary – these are still puzzles from 20 years ago – but they hold up better than many games from the same year.

The element of the game that I enjoyed the most was Mario's versatility of movement. Between handstands, pivot jumps, and triple jumps, it's a blast to move from one side of the stage to another. They're necessary techniques in later levels, but early on, you can become the master of the space and skip entire sections if you know what you're doing. Combining this with its intuitive puzzle design, Mario vs. Donkey Kong makes players feel smart and skilled even when the puzzles are relatively straightforward. Triple jumping out of a handstand over an enemy through the final collectible present and into the end of the level is thrilling every time you pull it off.

The game makes up for its age with a number of new features, my favorite of which is a "casual mode." When activated, Mario no longer resets the level when he dies. Instead, he has a limited number of bubbles that he can use to respawn at nearby checkpoints upon taking damage. It opens the game to younger players or anyone who might get stuck more easily. The puzzles don't get any less challenging, but the platforming becomes more forgiving, which makes the game less frustrating, especially in some tough-as-nails postgame levels.

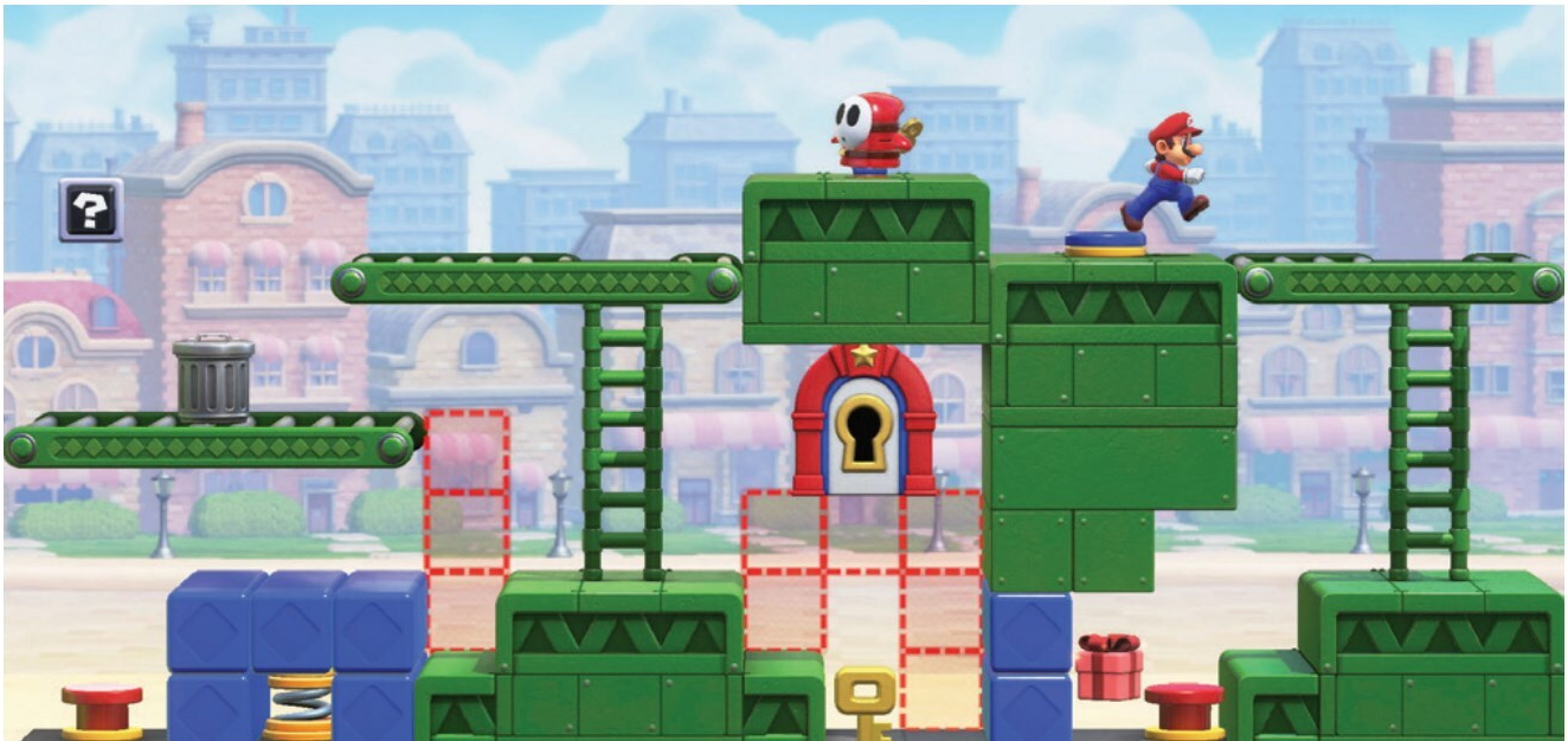
This remake also adds two new worlds: Merry Mini-Land and Slippery Summit. While I found them to be a tad easier than the existing levels, they fit the style of the other stages well, and they're welcome additions that slightly extend what was previously a short game. After beating the game, you also unlock a Time Attack mode for every completed level, adding a new challenge for willing players. Add on the plus worlds (harder versions of all eight base worlds) and a series of expert stages, and the game has a healthy amount of content if you're willing to dive in. Completing the plus worlds was enough of a challenge for me, but I was glad to know there was more to play if the mood struck.

Mario vs. Donkey Kong is a simple game, but as is the case with Mario's best titles, there's an elegance to that simplicity. Nintendo has done a stellar job adding features to make it more palatable to a modern audience, but it only comes together because of how well the classic levels hold up. Mario and Donkey Kong have been rivals for over 40 years, and this game admirably carries that legacy forward.

BY CHARLES HARTE

8

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Puzzle/Platforming **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** February 16 **RATING** E



GI
MUST
PLAY

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

Passing the torch

Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth is developer Ryu Ga Gotoku's (RGG) most ambitious project by a long shot – an epic tale told across multiple characters and continents. Some of this is the best work the developer has ever done. And some of it is the studio's worst. It's complicated.

Infinite Wealth picks up a few years after the events of Yakuza: Like a Dragon and continues the story of dual-series protagonist Ichiban Kasuga, who early in the story finds himself on the way to Hawaii. Once there, he quickly runs into his counterpart Kiryu Kazuma. Kiryu plays a much larger role in this game than in Like a Dragon before it – mainly because he's also a playable character. Ichiban and Kiryu being playable in the same game represents a passing of the torch of sorts, and I truly love the time I got to spend with Kiryu. He's an old man now with cancer and a few months to live. He's coming to terms with his life.

Moving a bulk of the game's story to Hawaii allows RGG to open up its narrative potential. The studio takes aim at America's corrupt police state and the ways in which the police abuse its position to exploit common citizens and foreigners and ignore its roles within society. It's incredibly refreshing to see a studio successfully approaching these issues with maturity.

Additionally, Infinite Wealth pulls from the real-world laws against former yakuza. It examines whether or not they're actually useful means of rehabilitation. Kiryu, as a character, beautifully fits this narrative hook. He is a criminal. Ichiban, too. What does it mean to reintroduce criminals into society? The best moments of Infinite Wealth are when these questions are called into focus, and I was constantly surprised at the empathy shown throughout.

But it takes some pretty spectacular stumbles on the way to that greatness. Much of the Hawaii plotline revolves around the Palekana religious cult and its figurehead, Bryce Fairchild. The game's portrayal of cults and religious fanaticism is laughable at best. Bryce is certainly evil; it's just that he's evil in a way with no depth. The game is all too quick to shove the Palekana story aside to focus on other topics. It's unfortunate because this plotline is stacked against some of the best moments in the series.

Luckily, Infinite Wealth's gameplay is stellar across the board. Honolulu, especially, has a completely different vibe than other RGG worlds, and I loved exploring its bright beaches, seedy back streets, and luxurious hotel districts. Taking Kiryu back to the streets of Kamurocho is wonderfully nostalgic, too, and Infinite Wealth wastes no time letting him reminisce. I loved how much thought went into how we would react.

Infinite Wealth continues Like a Dragon's change to turn-based combat, and the updates here make for a surprisingly deep and engaging system. The inclusion of directional and combo attacks adds interesting layers to how you approach an enemy. Exploiting an enemy's weakness and, in turn, having multiple members of your party dynamically attack the same foe in one turn consistently feels great. And I was always excited to see what new whacky animations I'd see when getting new magic attacks.

Despite its missteps, I can't help but be amazed by what Infinite Wealth pulls off over its impressively long run-time. It's rare to see a triple-A video game have anything worthwhile to say. I'm shocked that its combat system consistently felt new and fresh after 60 hours. That it gave me so much time with some of my favorite characters in video games, allowing me to know them so much deeper than I ever knew before, was just the cherry on top.

BY BLAKE HESTER

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **RELEASE** January 25 **RATING** M

SKULL AND BONES

Middle high sea

Like a ship that has changed tack countless times and delayed its arrival at port, Skull and Bones has launched far later than expected and faced trouble along the way. Even so, this pirate adventure surprised me with the breadth of its world, the richness of its commerce simulation, and its approachable naval combat system.

You are a treasure-hungry pirate eager for infamy as you set out across the Indian Ocean, tracking down treasure chests, plundering seaside towns, and, most prominently, battling other ships on the high seas. On-foot activity is reserved for social spaces and the most minimal of story development – the entirety of action unfolds on the water, where you develop an impressive array of ships and weaponry through your ill-gotten gains.

I enjoyed the deliberate pacing of sea exploration and movement, punctuated by the regular interruption of cannon fire and mortars. Especially in the early hours, I was often transfixed by the sights and sounds of moving across the water, listening to my crew's sea shanties, watching for breaching whales, and using my spyglass to spot distant shipwrecks. It's a big and beautifully crafted world of island-rich open waters and tricky narrow riverways.

Combat has just enough complexity to remain entertaining as you balance turning speed, facing, and damage output. The real fun comes from building and tweaking your boat as an engine of destruction; the variety of ship builds and approaches to fighting kept me consistently interested in chasing that next upgrade. I appreciated the approach to tracking specific items and upgrades, with clear markings on the map for where to find what you want.

The bulk of play is PvE encounters against privateers, merchants, and corporation ships, played either solo or cooperatively. Even if the open servers allow for both structured and informal PvP, my anecdotal experience was that most players were focused on their own adventures. If they joined a battle, it was often to help out. Your mileage may vary, but I liked the mix of mostly campaign-style progression with the option to connect with other players when I wanted.

Beyond ramming and blowing up other ships, Skull and Bones' other core pillar is commerce. Ubisoft has built a robust trading system, the most lucrative of which involves illicit rum and opium shipments. The selling of commodities gathered from sunken ships is the most superficial layer, but you can also run your own manufacturing and delivery contracts for higher sums. And as you round the corner into the endgame, an entire kingpin empire opens up, letting you take over lumberyards and other factories to generate income passively.

The pirate life eventually wears out its welcome. While it's fun in the early hours getting your bearings in an unfamiliar sea, later side and main missions become painfully repetitive. Long ocean voyages start to lose their charm, and a fast travel system that only works from port feels increasingly restrictive.

The freeform progression that was so welcome in the early hours also causes problems over time, as it's too easy to be over- or underleveled for certain content you might wish to confront, robbing many encounters of tension since the winning party is so evident from the outset.

The storytelling is incredibly sparse, led by very few core contacts, all of whose arcs are pretty one-note. And while it's nice that you can customize the look of your pirate captain, their voiceless absence of personality feels especially ill-suited to the big personalities you expect in a classic pirate tale.

Nonetheless, the combination of building a commerce empire and late-game PvE and PvP events has appeal even after the core story missions wrap up, giving me hope that longterm endgame could be entertaining. And while it's early days, I saw potential in the larger ship team-up activities I tried out, where each ship takes on specific roles like you might see in an MMO.

Despite its circuitous course to arrive at port, Skull and Bones is the type of game that may change significantly in the coming months. As it stands, fellow pirate enthusiasts may discover what I did – a flawed but beautifully presented historical fantasy in which one can take to the water and make a fortune, even if absolutely everything about the pirate life isn't always pretty. **BY MATT MILLER** ■

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 20-Player Online Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Singapore **RELEASE** February 16 **RATING** M

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

How the Resident Evil 4 remake was reinvented again for VR

BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

DEFLECTING A CROSSBOW'S BOLT in real life takes practice. In the Resident Evil 4 (RE4) VR port, all it takes is lifting the controller in the air at the right time.

And it's always satisfying.

The parry mechanic is one of the novel additions of the 2023 remake developed by Capcom. Whenever a bolt or melee attack from an infected villager is about to impact Leon Kennedy, you only need to press a button to deflect with the in-game knife. This action grants an opportunity to follow up with an attack on the spot while simultaneously adding to RE4's original close-quarter smackdown.

Adapting this to the PlayStation VR2 wasn't easy. Instead of Leon doing a swift animation with just a button press, you need to grab the knife from your chest, lift it up in the air, and match the incoming attack. It's more involved, sure, but also more immersive, adding a new layer of novelty to the mechanic.

"Enemy attacks have attack detections set at the weapon's position," director Keisuke Yamakawa says. "So, just by checking the contact between the enemy's attack detection and Leon's knife, we were almost able to get our anticipated behavior. When we managed to perform the first parry, the team was very excited about how much fun it was, and we were convinced that [the] VR Mode was going to be entertaining."

Parrying is just one of many elements that went through careful consideration when translating the remake to virtual reality. To find out more about the process, Game Informer spoke to Yamakawa and producer Masato Kumazawa about the development of the VR Mode, how the VR version of Resident Evil Village served as a foundation, and what to expect in the future from Capcom's ongoing push into the medium.

KNIFE PARTY

Would Leon throw a knife in the midst of battle? Virtual reality grants you greater control over characters, and the team had to consider all possibilities of player agency. In deciding where to place boundaries and where to allow people to experiment, Capcom came up with three main pillars. Namely, whether your actions are fun in VR, whether you feel like you're incarnating Leon, and if it all fits the RE4 experience.

At first, the team wasn't sure about this possibility. In the VR version of Resident Evil Village, you can not only throw knives as Ethan Winters but weapons as well. Since Ethan is a civilian, the concept of him throwing whatever he has at hand to hit an enemy and make a quick escape doesn't sound irrational. However, Leon has had a ton of training and experience in the field, so he wouldn't be throwing a pistol at somebody's head.

Ultimately, the developers figured players would want to throw knives as Leon regardless, so they added the mechanic for VR. Unlike Village, there's a slight delay before returning the knife to the shortcut slot after throwing – which is placed on your virtual body at arm's reach. Moreover, there's the advantage of recovering a bit of the knife's durability by manually returning it to the slot. Considering knives have a more prominent use in RE4, this all fits the concept well. Aside from attacking enemies, you can throw knives at bear traps to trigger them safely out of harm's way or do target practice with chickens to get eggs.

In the VR version of Village, you're able to close your hands to form a fist and punch werewolves. Unlike the knife, there's no delay or cooldown time preventing you from defending yourself with this method. Sure, the damage is vastly inferior in contrast to knives and guns, but since it's considered a VR novelty and not a proper mechanic, there isn't a penalty in place. Allowing you to punch Ganados as Leon was also considered early in development. The problem, the developers say, was it meant replacing the existing melee system in favor of a punch you could repeat without a clear penalty. Funnily enough, you can wield two knives simultaneously to stab enemies quickly. But of course, the durability will prevent you from endlessly repeating this action. (Unless you find all Clockwork Castellans to unlock the Primal Knife, which can be upgraded to become indestructible. You're welcome.)

Of course, Village wasn't the only point of reference. The original Resident Evil 4 got a standalone VR version developed by Armature Studio and published by Oculus Studios back in 2021. While the team didn't mention it as an inspiration, there are multiple similarities, such as cutscenes displayed on a virtual TV of sorts. As for the world itself, there isn't a big focus on interactivity, which is one of VR's standout features. Perhaps more importantly, the first-person perspective shifts to third-person each time you perform melee actions, like the flat version.

"During the spinning kick attack, Leon's posture changes drastically, and his body rotates," Yamakawa says. "Therefore, it was clear that placing the camera at the head position would not produce a proper image. It was also important to be able to check the surrounding situation and the enemies caught by the kick, so we decided to use the third-person view from the beginning."

ALTERNATE REALITIES

In addition to throwing knives and manually parrying attacks, you can grab items and inspect them up close, do revolver tricks à la Revolver Ocelot in Metal Gear Solid, and even reload a shotgun by cocking the weapon with one hand. In order to keep up with the intensity of the RE4 remake, a lot had to be streamlined along the way.

Barrels and crates containing items can be destroyed by swinging your knife, but you can opt to use a button prompt that does the action for you as well. In the base game, whenever Leon enters a dark area, he turns on a flashlight until you're back in a well-lit environment. This happens in VR, too, but the light is attached to your head by default, following your movement. You can, however, grab it from your forehead and move it yourself, similarly to Village, until the section ends. Each weapon has its peculiarities, especially when it comes to reloading, but some are simpler than what you'd expect in VR. As the team says, these shortcuts are intended to make it so your attention is on the action around you.

"For the shotgun and other weapon types that load one shot, we understand that as a VR game, it would be very interesting to reload one shell at a time," Yamakawa says. "But in Resident Evil 4, the combat is very intense, and if the players have to reload the shells one by one during combat, it would make it very difficult and might affect your level of enjoyment."

According to Kumazawa, the release of the VR Mode was scheduled "a year after" the initial release of the base game, which came out on March 24, 2023. It ended up being less than that, being released as a free DLC on December 8 of the same year.

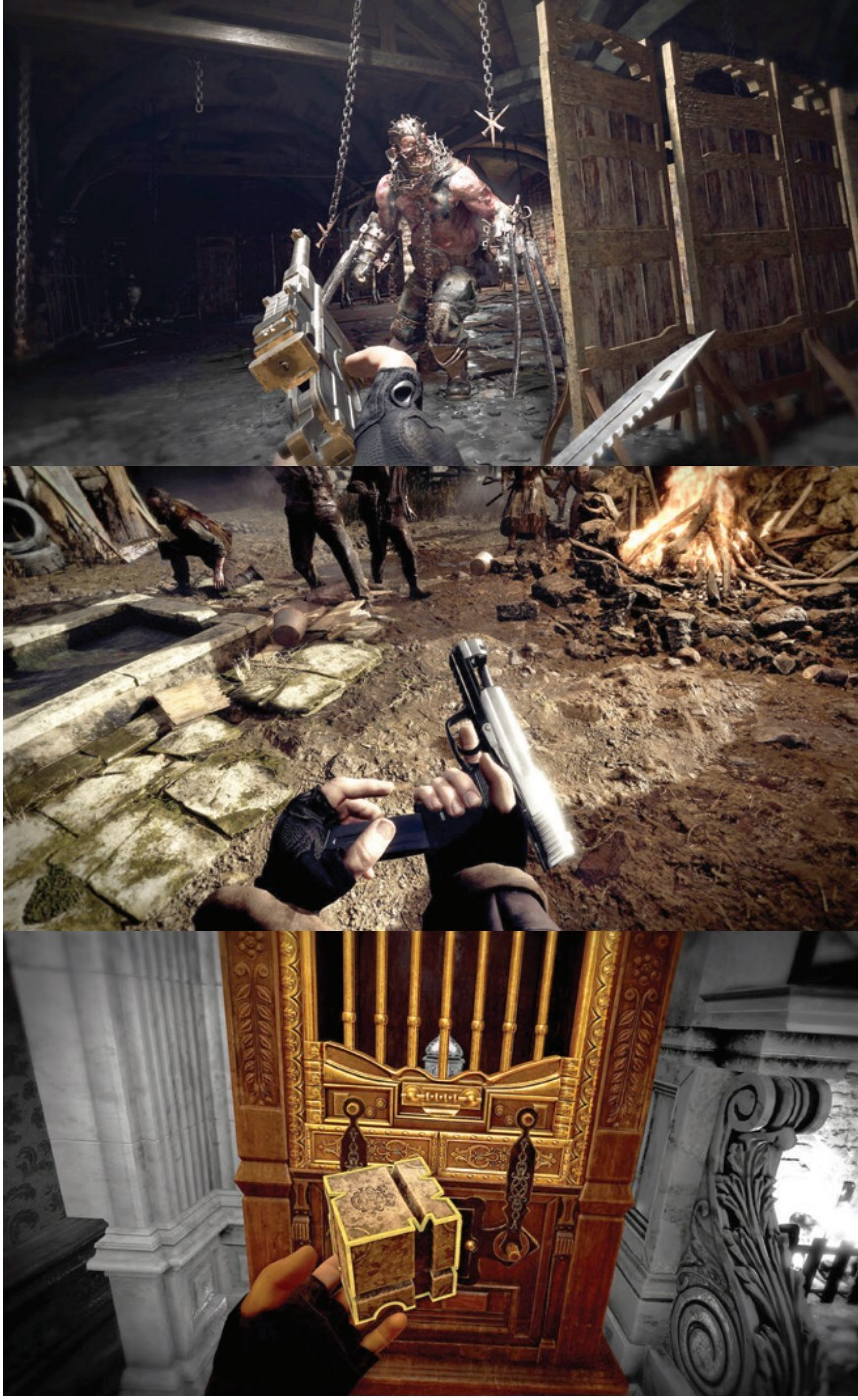
This was partly thanks to the fact that when the core team was still developing the main game, it also started working on aspects of the VR Mode. Additionally, the director of Village helped the team during the initial phases of development, while Yamakawa himself worked on the VR version of Resident Evil 7. It made for a much smoother process, even if mechanics like dual-wielding weapons had to be made from scratch.

In the "Integrated Report 2015" document released by Capcom in the same year, the company expressed its interest and commitment to VR for its Development Division 1, the group responsible for the Resident Evil series. Nine years later, half of the mainline Resident Evil games released in this time have gotten a VR version on PlayStation headsets. The Resident Evil 2 and 3 remakes and Armature's version of RE4 are the outliers.

When asked if this focus on VR has influenced the way Capcom develops new games in the franchise, knowing it'd be working on a VR version ahead of time, the team suggested otherwise. "The simple answer is 'No,'" Yamakawa says. "It's very important to us that the main game is as interesting as possible, so we didn't make any changes to it just because there was going to be a VR mode." This, in addition, encompasses core additions like the parry. It wasn't until the team started iterating on the base game to translate the experience to VR that tweaks and changes to the mechanic were made.

The interviewees say they implemented all the elements they wanted for Resident Evil 4 VR. Once they wrapped up the project, they realized VR was well-suited to the franchise. While they didn't discuss specifics, Kumazawa says they "plan to undertake more challenges in the future."

Moreover, Kumazawa adds that one of the reasons for releasing the VR versions of Village and 4 as free DLC is that the team wants to try to help expand the VR market. Yamakawa, personally speaking, joined the project as a director because of his enthusiasm for VR.



While conditions such as motion sickness continue to be a concern for players to access VR, Yamakawa says there's been substantial improvement in comparison to the original PlayStation VR headset.

"When we received the first version of the original VR development kit, I spent a lot of time playing it," Yamakawa says. "VR also matches with the Resident Evil franchise really well. I would like VR to get much more popular with the public. Since headsets can still be quite expensive and heavy, I would love for the kits to continue getting lighter and more affordable to make it more [approachable] to the general audience." ■

ONE LAST THING

INDUSTRY LAYOFFS

THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY IS ONE OF THE MOST PROFITABLE industries in the entire world, making hundreds of billions of dollars every year. It's also made people in executive positions very wealthy. And yet, despite that success, across 2023 and the opening months of 2024, we've seen an unprecedented amount of layoffs affecting studios and companies of all sizes.

It's important to note that layoffs almost always affect those *not* at the top of companies; they affect the average worker just trying to make a living. If executive leadership mishandles a project, the people at the top are not the ones who pay the price, but rather, it's those at the bottom who get the axe.

While there is plenty to be excited about in the world of video games, it would be unfair of us to ignore the recent layoffs that have plagued the industry. Right now, working and maintaining employment in video games is harder than it has any right to be. Here, you will find a far-from-comprehensive list of companies that have issued layoffs since the year began. More than 6,400 employees have been laid off since January 1, 2024. We're rooting for everyone affected and are hopeful they can find work again soon.

- Developers **Hexworks** (Lords of the Fallen) and **Underdog** (Sniper Ghost Warrior developer) under publisher **CI Games**
- DC Universe Online developer **Dimensional Ink Games** and its publisher **Daybreak Game Company**
- Dead By Daylight developer **Behaviour Interactive**
- Destroy All Humans remake developer **Black Forest Games**
- Deus Ex developer **Eidos-Montréal** and publisher **Embracer**
- Doom 3 VR developer **Archiact**
- League of Legends company **Riot Games**
- Members of **Microsoft's Xbox division** and recent acquisitions **Activision Blizzard** and **Zenimax**
- Mobile game publisher and developer **Playtika**
- Outriders and Bulletstorm developer **People Can Fly**
- Publisher **Thunderful** (Steamworld Build, Viewfinder)
- Ruined King and Wayfinder developer **Airship Syndicate**
- Ruiner developer **Reikon Games**
- **Sega of America**
- Game engine creator **Unity**
- Online communication platform **Discord** ■

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